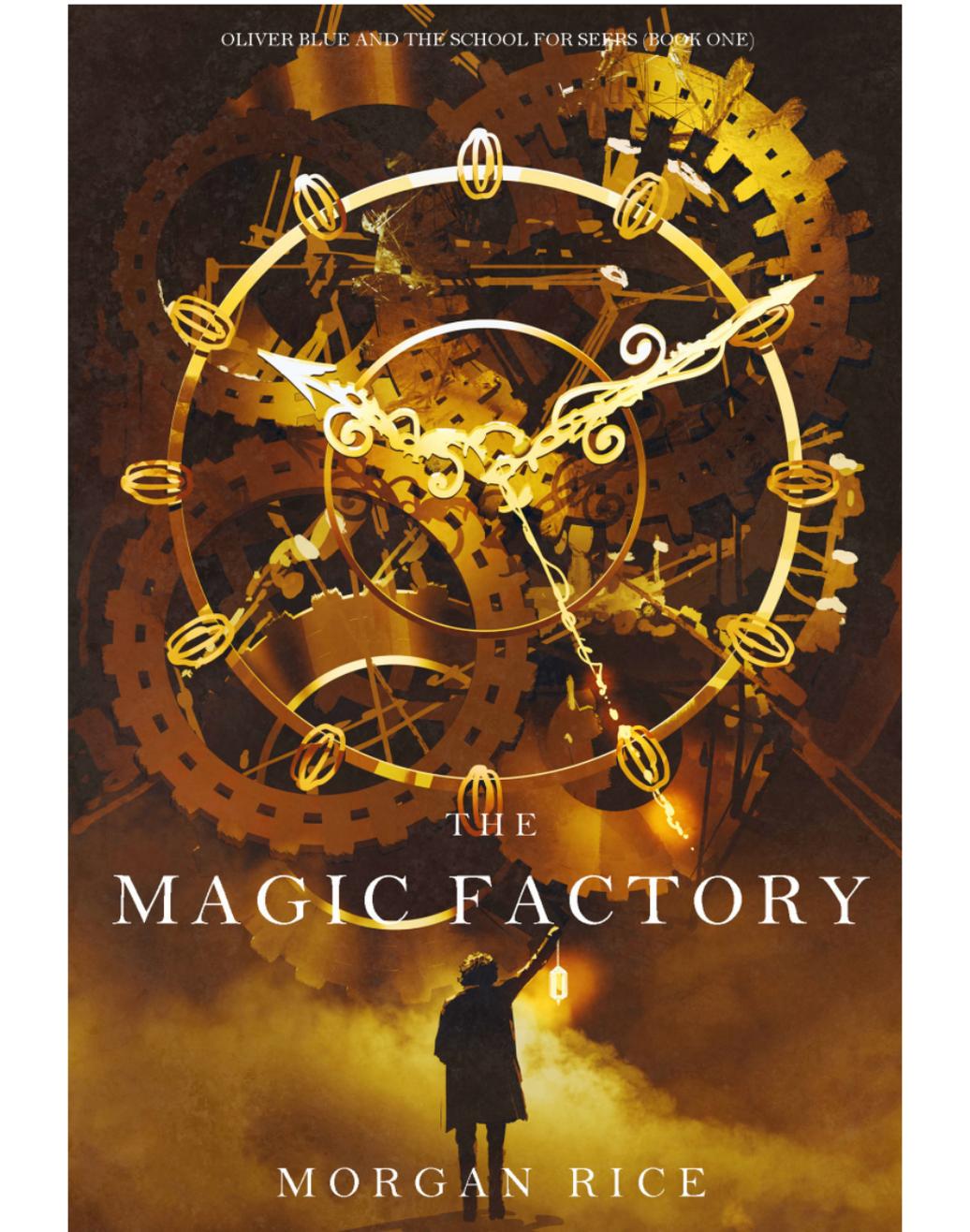


OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK ONE)



THE
MAGIC FACTORY

MORGAN RICE

Морган Райс
The Magic Factory
Серия «Oliver Blue and the
School for Seers», книга 1

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=39495434
The Magic Factory. Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book One:
ISBN 9781640296695*

Аннотация

“A powerful opener to a series [that] will produce a combination of feisty protagonists and challenging circumstances to thoroughly involve not just young adults, but adult fantasy fans who seek epic stories fueled by powerful friendships and adversaries.”

—Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan) (re A Throne for Sisters)

“Morgan Rice's imagination is limitless!”

—Books and Movie Reviews (re A Throne for Sisters)

From #1 Bestselling fantasy author Morgan Rice comes a new series for middle grade readers—and adults, too! Fans of Harry Potter and Percy Jackson—look no further!

THE MAGIC FACTORY: OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK ONE) tells the story of 11 year old Oliver Blue, a boy unloved by his hateful family. Oliver knows he is different, and senses that he holds powers that others do not. Obsessed with

inventions, Oliver is determined to escape his horrible life and make his mark on the world.

When Oliver is moved to yet another awful house he is put into in a new sixth grade, one even more terrifying than the last. He is bullied and excluded, and sees no way out. But when he stumbles across an abandoned invention factory, he wonders if his dreams might be about to come true.

Who is the mysterious old inventor hiding in the factory?

What is his secret invention?

And will Oliver end up transported back in time, to 1944, to a magical school for kids with powers to rival his own?

An uplifting fantasy, **THE MAGIC FACTORY** is book #1 in a riveting new series filled with magic, love, humor, heartbreak, tragedy, destiny, and a series of shocking twists. It will make you fall in love with Oliver Blue, and keep you turning pages late into the night.

Book #2 in the series (**THE ORB OF KANDRA**) and Book #3 (**THE OBSIDIANS**) are now also available!

“The beginnings of something remarkable are there.”

—San Francisco Book Review (re *A Quest of Heroes*)

Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	15
CHAPTER TWO	32
CHAPTER THREE	51
CHAPTER FOUR	64
CHAPTER FIVE	83
CHAPTER SIX	92
CHAPTER SEVEN	105
CHAPTER EIGHT	119
CHAPTER NINE	144
CHAPTER TEN	151
CHAPTER ELEVEN	156
PART TWO	163
CHAPTER TWELVE	164
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	169
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	180
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	186
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	197
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	209
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	218
CHAPTER NINETEEN	232
CHAPTER TWENTY	241
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE	255
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO	272

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE	276
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR	284
CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE	291
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX	298
CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN	312
CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT	319
CHAPTER TWENTY NINE	327
CHAPTER THIRTY	332
CHAPTER THIRTY ONE	338
CHAPTER THIRTY TWO	340
CHAPTER THIRTY THREE	343
CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR	350
CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE	358
CHAPTER THIRTY SIX	362
CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN	375

Morgan Rice

The Magic Factory. Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book One

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series **THE SORCERER'S RING**, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS**, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series **KINGS AND SORCERERS**, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series **OF CROWNS AND GLORY**, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series **A THRONE FOR SISTERS**, comprising eight books (and counting); of the new science fiction series **THE INVASION CHRONICLES**, comprising four books; and of the new fantasy series **OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS**, comprising three books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER’S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page.... Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy.”

--Books and Movie Reviews

Roberto Mattos

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

--The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the

Dragons)

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

--Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

--Publishers Weekly

Books by Morgan Rice

OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS

THE MAGIC FACTORY (Book #1)

THE ORB OF KANDRA (Book #2)

THE OBSIDIANS (Book #3)

THE INVASION CHRONICLES

TRANSMISSION (Book #1)

ARRIVAL (Book #2)

ASCENT (Book #3)

RETURN (Book #4)

THE WAY OF STEEL

ONLY THE WORTHY (Book #1)

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book #1)

A COURT FOR THIEVES (Book #2)
A SONG FOR ORPHANS (Book #3)
A DIRGE FOR PRINCES (Book #4)
A JEWEL FOR ROYALS (BOOK #5)
A KISS FOR QUEENS (BOOK #6)
A CROWN FOR ASSASSINS (Book #7)
A CLASP FOR HEIRS (Book #8)

OF CROWNS AND GLORY

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)
ROGUE, PRISONER, PRINCESS (Book #2)
KNIGHT, HEIR, PRINCE (Book #3)
REBEL, PAWN, KING (Book #4)
SOLDIER, BROTHER, SORCERER (Book #5)
HERO, TRAITOR, DAUGHTER (Book #6)
RULER, RIVAL, EXILE (Book #7)
VICTOR, VANQUISHED, SON (Book #8)

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)
RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)
THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)
A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)

A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)

NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)

A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)

A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)

A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)

A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)

A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)

A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)

A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)

A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)

A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)

AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)

A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)

A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)

THE GIFT OF BATTLE (Book #17)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)

ARENA TWO (Book #2)

ARENA THREE (Book #3)

VAMPIRE, FALLEN

BEFORE DAWN (Book #1)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

TURNED (Book #1)

LOVED (Book #2)

BETRAYED (Book #3)

DESTINED (Book #4)

DESIRED (Book #5)

BETROTHED (Book #6)

VOWED (Book #7)

FOUND (Book #8)

RESURRECTED (Book #9)

CRAVED (Book #10)

FATED (Book #11)

OBSESSED (Book #12)

**Did you know that I've written multiple series?
If you haven't read all my series, click the
image below to download a series starter!**



Want free books?

Subscribe to Morgan Rice's email list and receive 4 free books, 3 free maps, 1 free app, 1 free game, 1 free graphic novel, and exclusive giveaways! To subscribe, visit: www.morganricebooks.com

Copyright © 2018 by Morgan Rice. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

Oliver Blue glanced around the dark, dingy room. He sighed. This new house was about as bad as the last one. He clutched his only suitcase in his hands.

“Mom?” he said. “Dad?”

They both turned to look at him, scowling their ever permanent scowls.

“What, Oliver?” his mom said, sounding exasperated. “If you’re about to say you hate this place, don’t. It’s all we could afford.”

She seemed more stressed than usual. Oliver pressed his lips shut.

“It doesn’t matter,” he mumbled.

He turned, heading for the stairs. Upstairs he could already hear his older brother, Chris, thundering around the place. His mean, heavy-footed brother always tore through every new house in order to stake his claim to the best bedroom before Oliver got the chance.

He trudged up, suitcase in hand. On the landing, he found three doors. Behind one was a bathroom; the next opened to a master bedroom with a double bed; and the third contained Chris, who was sprawled on a bed like a starfish.

“Where’s my room?” Oliver said aloud.

As if anticipating the question, his mother yelled up the

staircase. “There’s only one room. You boys are going to have to share.”

Oliver felt a swirl of panic in the pit of his stomach. *Share?* That was not a word that Chris took to well.

Sure enough, Chris was up like a rocket. He barreled toward Oliver, pinning him to the wall. Oliver let out a loud *oomph*.

“We are *not* sharing,” Chris hissed through his teeth. “I’m thirteen years old, I’m not sharing a room with a **BABY!**”

“I’m not a baby,” Oliver muttered. “I’m eleven.”

Chris sneered. “Exactly. A pipsqueak. So you go down and tell Mom and Dad that you don’t want to share.”

“Tell them yourself,” Oliver grumbled. “Since you’re the one with the problem.”

Chris’s scowl grew deeper. “And tarnish my reputation as the favorite son? No way. You do it.”

Oliver knew better than to provoke Chris any further. His brother could fly into rages over the smallest of things. Over the years of having the bad luck to be Chris Blue’s younger brother, Oliver had learned how to tread carefully, how to tiptoe around his brother’s moods. He tried reasoning with him.

“There’s nowhere else to sleep,” he countered. “Where am I supposed to go?”

“Not my problem,” Chris replied, giving Oliver an extra shove. “Sleep in the kitchen cupboard under the sink with the mice for all I care. But you’re not sharing with me.”

He waved his fist in the air, a threat that needed no

explanation. There was nothing else to say. With a resigned sigh, Oliver collected himself from the wall, smoothed down his rumpled clothes, and trudged down the staircase.

His huge brother thundered down the steps after him, shoving him with an elbow as he went.

“Oliver said he won’t share,” Chris bellowed on his way past.

From the living room, Oliver heard Mom, Dad, and Chris begin to argue over the sleeping arrangements. He slowed his pace, less than eager to become embroiled in the fight.

Recently, Oliver had gained a new coping strategy for when the arguments erupted, and it involved sending his mind to a different place, a sort of dreamworld where everything was calm and safe, where the only boundary was his imagination. He went there now, closing his eyes and picturing himself in a huge brick factory surrounded by incredible inventions. Flying dragons made of brass and copper, huge steaming machines with turning cogs. Oliver loved inventions, so a big factory filled with magical ones was exactly the kind of place he wished he could be, rather than here, in this awful house with his awful family.

Suddenly, his mother’s shrill voice brought him back to the real world.

“Oliver! What’s all this fuss you’re causing?”

Oliver swallowed hard and took the final step. By the time he reached the living room, the three of them were gathered, arms crossed, matching scowls on their faces.

“You know there are only two rooms,” Dad began.

“And you’re causing a stink, saying you won’t share,” Mom added.

“What are we supposed to do?” Dad continued. “We don’t have the money for you both to have a bedroom.”

Oliver wanted to scream at them that this was all Chris’s fault, but the threat of harm from his brother was too great. Chris stood there glowering at him. There was nothing Oliver could do except take his parents’ harsh, unjust words.

“So?” Mom finished. “Where exactly is your Lordship planning on sleeping then?”

Chris smirked as Oliver glanced about him. As far as he could see, the downstairs area was the shape of a letter L, with a living room leading to a dining room of sorts—which was really just a corner containing nothing more than a rickety table—and then a kitchen around the corner. There was no extra room downstairs, just an open-plan setup.

Oliver couldn’t believe this was happening. All their houses had been horrible but at least he’d had a bedroom.

Behind him, Oliver saw there was a slight indentation, perhaps from a fireplace that had been removed years before. It was little more than an alcove but what other option was there? He was going to have to sleep in a corner! With no privacy at all!

And what about all his secret inventions, the ones he worked on at night when no one was looking? He knew if Chris found out what he was doing he’d ruin it. He’d probably stamp his inventions to dust. Without his own room and somewhere to keep

all his secret bits and bobs, Oliver wouldn't be able to work on them at all!

Oliver genuinely considered the kitchen cupboard, wondering whether that might actually be better. But he decided mice nibbling on his inventions would be just as bad as Chris stomping on them. So he decided that, with a little imagination—a curtain, a shelf, some lights, that sort of thing—the alcove *could* almost be a bit like a bedroom.

“There,” Oliver said quietly, pointing at the alcove.

“There?” his mom exclaimed.

Chris let out one of his bark-laughs. Oliver glared at him. Dad just tutted and shook his head.

“He’s a strange boy,” he said flippantly, to no one in particular. Then he let out an exaggerated sigh, as if this whole disagreement had been very trying for him. “But if he wants to sleep in the corner, let him sleep in the corner. I’m beyond knowing what to do with him.”

“Fine,” Mom said, exasperated. “You’re right, though. He’s getting more peculiar every day.”

The three of them turned away, heading toward the kitchen. Over his shoulder, Chris grinned at Oliver and whispered, “Freak.”

Oliver took a deep breath. He wandered over to the alcove and placed his case on the floor by his feet. There was nowhere to put his clothes; no shelves or drawers, and next to no space to fit his bed—assuming his parents even got him a bed. But he would

make do. He could hang a curtain for privacy, make some shelves out of wood, and construct a pull-out drawer for under his bed—the bed he hoped to get—so there was at least somewhere safe to store his inventions.

Besides, if he were to look on the positive—something Oliver always tried his hardest to do—he was right beside a big window, which meant he'd have plenty of light and views to gaze out at.

He rested his elbows on the ledge now and gazed out at the gray October day. It was very windy outside, with rubbish blowing across the street. Opposite his house was a damaged car and a rusty washing machine that had been dumped there. It was definitely a poor neighborhood, Oliver decided. One of the worst they'd ever lived in.

The wind blew, making the glass of the windows rattle, and a breeze came through a gap in the woodwork. Oliver shivered. For October, the weather was much colder than it usually was in New Jersey. He'd even heard a report on the radio of a huge storm coming. But Oliver loved storms, especially when there was thunder and lightning.

He sniffed as the smell of cooking swirled in his nostrils. Turning back from the window, he ventured around the corner to the kitchen area. His mom was standing at the stove, stirring a big pot of something.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“Meat,” she said. “And potatoes. And peas.”

Oliver’s stomach grumbled in anticipation. His family always

ate simple meals, but Oliver didn't mind that much. He had simple tastes.

"Go and wash your hands, boys," Dad said from where he sat at the table.

From the corner of his eye, Oliver caught sight of Chris's mean grin and already knew his brother had another cruel torment up his sleeve. The last thing he wanted to do was get trapped in the bathroom with Chris, but Dad looked up again from the table, his eyebrows raised.

"Do I have to say everything twice?" he complained.

There was no way out of it. Oliver left the room, Chris right on his tail. He hurried up the stairs, making a beeline for the bathroom in an attempt to get the hand-washing over and done with as quickly as possible. But Chris was right there in pursuit, and as soon as they were out of their parents' earshot, he grabbed Oliver and shoved him into the wall.

"Guess what, squirt," he said.

"What?" Oliver said, bracing himself.

"I'm really, really hungry tonight," Chris said.

"So?" Oliver replied.

"So, you're going to let me have your dinner, aren't you? You're going to tell Mom and Dad you're not hungry."

Oliver shook his head. "I already gave you the bedroom!" he refuted. "Let me have my potatoes, at the very least."

Chris laughed. "No way. We're starting a new school tomorrow. I've got to be strong in case there are other pipsqueaks

like you I need to pick on.”

The mention of school sent a new wave of trepidation washing through Oliver. He'd started so many new schools in his life and each time it seemed to get a little worse. There was always a Chris Blue equivalent who was able to sniff him out, who wanted to pick on him no matter what he did. And there were never any allies. Oliver had long ago given up on making friends. What was the point when he'd just be moving again in a matter of months?

Chris's face softened. “Tell you what, Oliver, I'll be kind. Just this once.” Then he grinned and burst into maniacal laughter. “I'll give you a knuckle sandwich for dinner!”

He raised his fist. Oliver ducked away, missing the flailing fist by mere millimeters. He bolted downstairs for the living room.

“Come back, toe rag!” Chris yelled.

He was right on Oliver's heels, but Oliver was fast, and he hurried to the dining table. Dad looked up at him as he stood there panting, recovering from the sprint.

“Are you two fighting again?” He sighed. “What about this time?”

Chris skidded to a halt beside Oliver.

“Nothing,” he said quickly.

Suddenly, Oliver felt a sharp pinching sensation at his waist. Chris was digging his nails in. Oliver looked over at him, at the look of triumphant glee on his face.

Dad looked suspicious. “I don't believe you. What's going on?”

The pinch got stronger, the pain radiating through Oliver's

side. He knew what he had to do. There was no choice.

“I was just saying,” he said, wincing, “that I’m not feeling very hungry tonight.”

Dad looked at him wearily. “Mom’s been slaving over that stove for you and now you’re saying you don’t want it?”

Mom looked over her shoulder from the stove with a wounded expression. “What’s the problem? Don’t you like meat anymore? Or is it the potatoes that are the issue?”

Oliver felt Chris’s pinch deepen even more, sending an even sharper pain through him.

“Sorry, Mom,” he said, his eyes watering. “I *am* grateful. I’m just not hungry.”

“What am I supposed to do with him?” Mom exclaimed. “First the bedroom, now this! My nerves can’t take it.”

“I’ll have his extras,” Chris said quickly. Then in a sugary voice, he added, “I don’t want all your efforts to go to waste, Mom.”

Mom and Dad both looked at Chris. He was bulky and getting ever bulkier but they didn’t seem concerned. Either that, or they didn’t want to stand up to the bully son they’d raised.

“Fine,” Mom said, sighing. “But you have got to sort out that brain of yours, Oliver. I can’t be having this sort of fuss every evening.”

Oliver felt Chris’s pinch release. He rubbed his sore side.

“Okay, Mom,” he said, sadly. “Sorry, Mom.”

As the sound of cutlery and crockery clinked behind him,

Oliver turned from the dining table, his stomach growling, and walked back to his alcove. To block out the smells that made his hunger even more pronounced, he distracted himself by opening his suitcase and taking out his one and only possession, a book about inventors. A kind librarian had given it to him several years ago after noticing that he kept coming in to read it. Now it was dog-eared, well-worn from the million times he'd leafed through it. But no matter how often he read it, he never got bored. Inventors and inventions fascinated him. In fact, one of the reasons Oliver wasn't that sad about moving to this neighborhood in New Jersey was because he'd read about a factory nearby where an inventor named Armando Illstrom built some of his finest creations. It didn't matter to Oliver that Armando Illstrom was included in the *Zany Inventors* section of the book, or that most of his contraptions failed. Oliver still found him very inspirational, especially his booby trap device which was designed to scare away raccoons. Oliver was trying to create his own version to ward off Chris.

Just then, he heard the sound of clinking cutlery coming from the kitchen. He looked up to see his family sitting at the table, preoccupied with their dinner, Chris slurping up Oliver's helping.

Frowning at the unfairness of it all, Oliver discreetly took his invention pieces out of his suitcase and laid them on the floor before him. The booby trap was in a state of half completion. It was a kind of slingshot mechanism that would activate when a lever was pressed underfoot, catapulting acorns into the face

of the intruder. Of course, Armando's version was for a raccoon so Oliver had had to scale it up in order to fit the much larger dimensions of his brother, and he'd replaced the acorns with the only thing he had on hand, which was a small plastic statue of a soldier. He'd managed to get most of the mechanism constructed, as well as the lever. But every time he pressed it down to test it, it didn't work. The soldier would not be flung. It just sat there, gun poised.

With his family distracted, Oliver got to work on it. He set all the pieces out, laying the trap. But he couldn't figure out why it wouldn't work. Perhaps, he thought, this was the reason Armando Illstrom was considered zany. None of his inventions worked very well. If at all.

Just then, Oliver heard his family begin to bicker. He squeezed his eyes shut to block it out, allowing his mind to take him to his special dream place. Once again, he was in a factory. This time the booby trap device was right in front of him. It was in perfect working order, catapulting acorns left, right, and center. But Oliver couldn't see how it was any different from his version.

"Magic," a voice said behind him.

Oliver jumped. Never in his dream land had there been any people!

But when he looked behind him, there was no one there. He swirled on the spot, searching for the owner of the voice, but could see no one at all.

He opened his eyes, bringing himself back to the real world, to

the dark corner of the dingy room that was his new home. Why on earth had his imagination conjured up *magic* as a solution? Magic wasn't his cup of tea. If it had been, he would have bought a book of tricks, not a book of inventors. He liked inventions, solid things, practical items with a purpose. He liked science and physics, not intangible, mystical things.

Just then, the smell of dinner wafted toward him. From his place on the floor, Oliver couldn't help but look toward the table. There, eyes locked on Oliver, sat Chris. He shoved a large potato into his mouth and grinned widely as grease dribbled down his chin.

Oliver glared, feeling a sense of fury come over him. That was *his* potato! A strong urge overcame him, to walk over and swipe his arm across the table, sending everything on it clattering to the ground. He could just picture it now. What a sweet victory it would feel like!

Suddenly, Oliver's sense of fury was replaced by something different, something new that he'd never felt before. With a *whoosh*, a strange calmness overcame him, a peculiar sense of certainty. And just like that, a loud crack sounded out, coming from the table. One of its legs had snapped right in the middle. The table lurched suddenly to the side. All the plates started to slide along it, and then they fell right off the end, smashing to the ground one by one. The noise was horrendous.

Mom and Dad cried out, both alarmed by the sudden turn of events. As peas and potatoes went flying everywhere, they leapt

up from their chairs.

Shocked, Oliver leapt to his feet too. Had he made that happen? Just with his mind? Surely not!

While Mom hurried to the kitchen, looking for towels to clean up the mess, Dad knelt down to inspect the table.

“Cheap, shoddy thing,” he said gruffly. “The leg’s snapped clean in half!”

From the table, Chris’s gaze fixed on Oliver. Whether Oliver had somehow broken the table leg with his mind or not, Chris clearly blamed him for it.

With his gaze locked on Oliver, Chris rose slowly from his chair. Potatoes and peas rolled from his lap to the floor. His face grew redder and redder. He clenched his hands into fists. Then, like an exploding rocket, he came galumphing toward Oliver.

Oliver gasped and turned quickly to the booby trap. His fingers moved quickly to set it up.

Please work! Please work! he thought over and over again.

The whole thing happened as if in slow motion. Chris loomed up before Oliver. Oliver’s foot stomped onto the lever. Oliver held on to the desire for the machine to work, picturing the soldier flying through the air just as he’d pictured the plates crashing to the ground. And then, sure enough, the mechanism began to whirl. The soldier launched into the air, sailed in an arc, and smacked Chris with his plastic, pointy rifle, right between the eyes!

Time sped up back to normal. Oliver gasped, awestruck, not

quite believing it had worked.

Chris stood there, perplexed. The soldier fell to the floor. There was a small red mark in the middle of Chris's forehead, a dent from the hard plastic gun.

"You little jerk!" Chris yelled, rubbing his head in disbelief. "I'll get you back for that!"

But for the first time ever, he hesitated. He seemed too wary to approach Oliver, to sock him in the ear, or rub his knuckles against his head. Instead, he backed away as if he were scared. Then he stormed out of the room and upstairs. The sound of his slamming door resonated through the house.

Oliver's mouth dropped open. He couldn't believe that it had really worked! Not only had he made his invention work at the last second, but he'd literally made Chris's meal fall to the floor with his mind!

He looked down at his hands. Did he have some kind of power? Was there really such a thing as magic? He couldn't just suddenly start believing in it because of one little experience. But deep down he knew that he was different in some way, that he had some kind of power.

Mind swimming, he went back to his book and read, for the millionth time, the passage about Armando Illstrom. Thanks to his invention, Oliver had scared Chris away for the first time ever. He wanted to meet Armando Illstrom more than ever. And the factory really wasn't that far from his new school. Maybe he should visit him after school tomorrow.

But surely he would be a very old man now. Possibly so old that he'd passed on. The thought made Oliver's heart sink. He'd hate it if his hero had passed before he'd had a chance to meet him, and to thank him for inventing the booby trap!

He read again the passage about Armando's string of failed inventions. The passage stated—in a rather wry tone, Oliver noted—that Armando Illstrom had been on the cusp of inventing a time machine when World War Two broke out. His factory had ground to a halt. But when the war ended, Armando had never tried to finish his invention. And everyone had ridiculed him for trying in the first place, calling him the “lesser Edison.” Oliver wondered why Armando had stopped. Surely not because of some bully inventors laughing at him?

His interest was piqued. Tomorrow, he decided, he would find the factory. And if Armando Illstrom was still alive, he'd ask him, to his face, what had happened to his time machine.

His parents emerged from around the corner of the kitchen, both covered in food.

“We're going to bed,” Mom said.

“What about my blankets and things?” Oliver asked, looking at the bare alcove.

Dad sighed. “I suppose you want me to fetch them from the car, do you?”

“It would be nice,” Oliver replied. “I'd like to get a good night's sleep before school tomorrow.”

The sense of dread he felt about tomorrow was beginning to

grow, mirroring the building storm. He could already tell he was going to have the worst day ever. At the very least he'd like to be rested in preparation. He'd had so many horrible first days at new schools he was certain the one tomorrow was going to be another to add to the list.

Dad trudged reluctantly out of the house, a plume of wind roaring through as he opened the front door. He returned a few moments later with a pillow and blanket for Oliver.

"We'll get a bed in a couple of days," he said, as he handed the bedding over to Oliver. It was cold from having been in the car all day.

"Thanks," Oliver replied, grateful for even this level of comfort.

His parents left, turning off the light as they went, plunging Oliver into darkness. Now the only light in the room was from the street lamp outside.

The wind began to roar again and the window panes rattled. Oliver could tell the weather was building, that something odd was in the air. He'd heard on the radio that the storm of a lifetime was coming. He couldn't help but be excited about it. Most kids would dread a storm but Oliver was only dreading his first day at his new school.

He went over to the window, leaning his elbows against the ledge as he had before. The sky was almost completely dark. A spindly tree blew in the wind, angled sharply to one side. Oliver wondered if it might snap off. He could just picture it now, the

thin bark snapping, the tree launching into the air, carried away by the fierce winds.

And that's when he saw them. Just as he was transitioning into his daydreaming state, he noticed two people standing by the tree. A woman and a man who looked remarkably like him, like they could easily be mistaken for his parents. They had kind faces and they smiled at him as they held one another's hands.

Oliver jumped back from the window, startled. For the first time, he realized that neither of his parents looked anything like him. They both had dark hair and blue eyes, as did Chris. Oliver, on the other hand, was the rarer combination of blond hair and brown eyes.

Oliver wondered, suddenly, if perhaps his parents weren't his parents at all. Perhaps that was why they seemed to hate him so much? He looked out the window but the two people were now gone. Just figments of his imagination. But they'd looked so real. And so familiar.

Wishful thinking, Oliver concluded.

Oliver sat back against the cold wall, tucking himself into the alcove that was his new bedroom, pulling the covers up over him. He brought his knees up to his chest and clasped them tightly, and was struck by a sudden strange sensation, a moment of realization, of clarity—that everything was about to change.

CHAPTER TWO

Oliver woke with a sense of trepidation. His whole body ached from sleeping on the hard floor. The blankets hadn't been thick enough to keep the cold from getting right into his bones. He was surprised he'd slept at all, considering how anxious he was feeling about his first day at school.

The house was very quiet. No one else was awake. Oliver realized he'd actually woken earlier than he needed to thanks to the dull sunrise seeping through the window.

He heaved himself up and peered out the window. The wind had wreaked havoc through the night, blowing down fences and mailboxes, and throwing trash all over the sidewalks. Oliver looked over at the spindly, crooked tree where he'd seen a vision of the friendly couple last night, the ones who had looked like him and made him wonder if perhaps he wasn't related to the Blues at all. He shook his head. It was just wishful thinking on his part, he reasoned. Anyone with Chris Blue as their older brother would dream they weren't actually related!

Knowing he had a little bit of time before his family woke up, Oliver turned from the window and went to his suitcase. He opened it up and looked inside at all the cogs and wires and levers and buttons he'd collected for his inventions. He smiled to himself as he looked at the slingshot booby trap that he'd used on Chris yesterday. But it was just one of Oliver's many inventions

and it wasn't the most important one, not by a long shot. Oliver's ultimate invention was something a little more complex, and a whole lot more important—because Oliver was attempting to invent a way to make himself invisible.

Theoretically, it was possible. He'd read all about it. There were actually only two necessary components to make an object invisible. The first was bending light around the object so it couldn't cast a shadow, similar to the way swimming pool water bent light and made the swimmers inside look strangely squat. The second necessary component to invisibility involved eliminating the object's reflection.

It sounded simple enough on paper, but Oliver knew there was a reason no one had achieved it yet. Still, that wasn't going to stop him from trying. He needed this in order to escape his miserable life, and it didn't matter how long it took him to get there.

He reached into his case now and took out all the bits of fabric he'd collected in search of something with negative refractive properties. Unfortunately, he hadn't found the right fabric yet. Then he took out all the coils of thin wire he'd need to make electromagnetic microwaves to bend the light unnaturally. Unfortunately, none of them were thin enough. In order to work, the coils would need to be less than forty nanometers in size, which was an unfeasibly small size for the human mind to comprehend. But Oliver knew that someone, somewhere, someday, would have a machine to make the coils thin enough, and the fabric refractive enough.

Just then, from upstairs, Oliver heard his parents' alarm clock jingle. He quickly packed away his items, knowing all too well that they'd go and wake Chris up next, and if Chris ever got wind of what he was trying to make, he would destroy all his hard work.

Oliver's stomach groaned then, reminding him that Chris's bullying and torment were about to begin anew, and that he'd better get some food in him before they did.

He passed the still broken dining table and went to the kitchen. Most of the cupboards were empty. The family hadn't yet had the chance to go grocery shopping for the new house. But Oliver found a box of cereal that had come over in the move, and there was fresh milk in the fridge, so he quickly made up a bowl and scarfed it down. Just in time, too. A few moments later, his parents emerged into the kitchen.

"Coffee?" Mom asked Dad, bleary-eyed, her hair a mess.

Dad just grunted his yes. He looked at the broken table and with a heavy sigh, fetched some packing tape. He got to work mending the table leg, wincing as he did so.

"It's that bed," he muttered as he worked. "It's wonky. And the mattress is too lumpy." He rubbed his back to emphasize the point.

Oliver felt a swell of anger. At least his dad had slept on a bed! *He'd* had to sleep on blankets in an alcove! The injustice stung him.

"I have no idea how I'm going to get through an entire day

at the call center,” Oliver’s mother added, coming over with the coffee. She placed it on the now tentatively fixed table.

“You have a new job, Mom?” Oliver asked.

Moving house all the time made it impossible for his parents to keep full-time work. Things at home were always harder when they were unemployed. But if Mom was working that meant nicer food, better clothes, and pocket money to buy more gizmos for his inventions.

“Yes,” she said, letting out a strained smile. “Dad and I both. The hours are long, though. Today’s a training day, but after that we’ll be doing the late shift. So we won’t be around after school. But Chris will keep an eye on you, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Oliver felt his stomach sink. He’d prefer Chris to not be in the equation at all. He was perfectly able to look after himself.

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Chris suddenly bounded into the kitchen. He was the only Blue who looked refreshed this morning. He stretched and let out a theatrical yawn, his shirt riding up over his round, pink belly as he did.

“Good morning, my wonderful family,” he said with his sarcastic grin. He flung an arm around Oliver, pulling him into a headlock cleverly masked as brotherly affection. “How are you, squirt? Looking forward to school?”

Oliver could hardly breathe, Chris was holding on so tight. As always, his parents seemed oblivious to the bullying.

“Can’t... wait...” he managed to say.

Chris let Oliver go and took a seat at the table opposite Dad.

Mom came over from the counter with a plate of buttered toast. She placed it in the center of the table. Dad took a slice. Then Chris leaned forward and snatched up the rest, leaving nothing for Oliver.

“HEY!” Oliver cried. “Did you see that?”

Mom looked at the empty plate and let out one of her exasperated sighs. She looked at Dad as if expecting him to step in and say something. But Dad just shrugged.

Oliver clenched his fists. It was so unfair. If he'd not preempted such an event he'd have missed *another* meal thanks to Chris. It infuriated him that neither of his parents ever stood up for him, or ever seemed to notice how often he had to go without because of Chris.

“Will you two be walking to school together?” Mom asked, clearly trying to sidestep the whole issue.

“Can't,” Chris said through his mouthful. Butter dribbled down his chin. “If I'm seen with a nerd I'll never make friends.”

Dad raised his head. For a second, it seemed as if he was about to say something to Chris, to chastise him for calling Oliver names. But then he clearly decided against it, because he just sighed wearily and let his gaze drop back down to the tabletop.

Oliver ground his teeth, trying to keep his growing fury at bay.

“Doesn't bother me,” he hissed, glaring at Chris. “I'd prefer not to be within a hundred feet of you anyway.”

Chris let out a spiteful bark-laugh.

“Boys...” Mom warned in the meekest voice ever.

Chris shook his fist at Oliver, indicating quite clearly that he’d get him back for it later.

With breakfast over, the family quickly got ready, and left the house to start their respective days.

Oliver watched as his parents got into their battered car and drove off. Then Chris stalked away without another word, hands in his pockets, a scowl on his face. Oliver knew how important it was for Chris to establish immediately that he was not to be messed with. It was his armor, the way he coped with turning up at a new school six weeks into the school year. Unfortunately for Oliver, he was too skinny and too short to even attempt to cultivate such an image. His appearance only ever added to how conspicuous he was.

Chris stormed ahead until he had disappeared from Oliver’s sight, leaving him to walk the unfamiliar streets alone. It was not the most pleasant walk of Oliver’s life. The neighborhood was tough, with lots of angry dogs barking behind chain-link fences, and loud, beat-up cars swerving along the potholed roads with no regard for the children crossing.

When Campbell Junior High loomed up ahead of him, Oliver felt a shiver run through him. It was a horrible-looking place made of gray brick, completely square, and with a weather-beaten facade. There wasn’t even any grass to sit on, just a large asphalt playground with broken basketball hoops on either side. Kids jostled each other, wrestling for the ball. And the noise!

It was deafening, from arguments and singing, to shouting and chatter.

Oliver wanted to turn around and run back the way he'd come. But he swallowed his fear and walked, head down, hands in pockets, across the playground and in through the large glass doors.

The corridors of Campbell Junior High were dark. They smelled of bleach, despite looking like they hadn't been cleaned in a decade. Oliver saw a sign for the reception area and followed it, knowing he'd have to announce himself to someone. When he found it, there was a very bored, angry-looking woman inside, her long red fingernails typing away into a computer.

"Excuse me," Oliver said.

She didn't respond. He cleared his throat and tried again, a little louder.

"Excuse me. I'm a new student, enrolling today."

Finally, she turned her eyes from the computer to Oliver. She squinted. "New student?" she asked, a look of suspicion on her face. "It's October."

"I know," Oliver replied. He didn't need reminding. "My family just moved here. I'm Oliver Blue."

She regarded him silently for a long moment. Then, without uttering another word, she turned her attention back to the computer and started typing. Her long fingernails clacked against the keys.

"Blue?" she said. "Blue. Blue. Blue. Ah, here. Christopher

John Blue. Eighth grade.”

“Oh no, that’s my brother,” Oliver replied. “I’m Oliver. Oliver Blue.”

“Can’t see a Oliver,” she replied, blandly.

“Well... here I am,” Oliver said, smiling weakly. “I should be on the list. Somewhere.”

The receptionist looked extremely unimpressed. The whole debacle was not helping with his nerves one bit. She typed again, then let out a long sigh.

“Okay. There. Oliver Blue. Sixth grade.” She turned in her swivel chair and dumped a folder of paperwork on the table. “You’ve got your schedule, map, useful contacts, et cetera, all in here.” She tapped it lazily with one of her shiny red nails. “Your first class is English.”

“That’s good,” Oliver said, taking the folder and tucking it under his arm. “I’m fluent.”

He grinned to indicate that he’d made a joke. The side of the receptionist’s lip twitched up, just barely, into an expression that might have resembled amusement. Realizing there was nothing more to be said between them, and sensing that the receptionist would very much like him to leave, Oliver backed out of the room, clutching his folder.

Once in the corridor, he opened it up and began to study the map, searching for the English room and his first class. It was on the third floor, so Oliver headed in the direction of the staircase.

Here, the jostling kids seemed to be even more jostly. Oliver

found himself swept up into a sea of bodies, being pushed up the staircase with the crowd rather than of his own volition. He had to fight his way through the swarm to get out at the third floor.

He popped out onto the third-floor corridor, panting. That was not an experience he was looking forward to repeating several times a day!

Using his map to guide him, Oliver soon found the English classroom. He peered through the little square window in the door. It was already half full of students. He felt his stomach swirl with anguish at the thought of meeting new people, of being seen and judged and evaluated. He pushed down the door handle and walked inside.

He was right to be scared, of course. He'd done this enough times to know that everyone would look over, curious about the new kid. Oliver had felt this sensation now more times than he cared to remember. He tried not to meet anyone's eyes.

"Who are you?" a gruff voice said.

Oliver swirled to see the teacher, an old man with shockingly white hair, looking up at him from his desk.

"I'm Oliver. Oliver Blue. I'm new here."

The teacher frowned. His beady eyes were black and suspicious. He regarded Oliver for an uncomfortably long time. Of course, this just added to Oliver's stress, because now even more of his classmates were paying attention to him, and still more were streaming in through the door. A greater and greater audience watched him with curiosity, like he was some kind of

spectacle at the circus.

“Didn’t know I was getting another one,” the teacher said, finally, with an air of disdain. “Would’ve been nice to have been informed.” He sighed wearily, reminding Oliver of his father. “Take a seat then. I suppose.”

Oliver hurried to a spare seat, feeling everyone’s eyes following him. He tried to make himself as small as possible, as unobservable as possible. But of course he stood out like a sore thumb no matter how much he tried to hide. He was the new kid, after all.

With all the seats now filled, the teacher began his class.

“We’re carrying on with where we left off last class,” he said. “About grammar rules. Can someone please explain to Oscar what we were talking about?”

Everyone started to laugh at his mistake.

Oliver felt his throat get tighter. “Um, sorry to interrupt, but my name is Oliver, not Oscar”

The teacher’s expression turned instantly cross. Oliver knew immediately that he wasn’t the kind of man who appreciated being corrected.

“When you’ve lived sixty-six years with a name like Mr. Portendorfer,” the teacher said, glowering, “you get over people pronouncing your name wrong. Profendoffer. Portenworten. I’ve heard it all. So I suggest you, *Oscar*, ought to be less concerned about the correct pronunciation of your name!”

Oliver raised his eyebrows, stunned into silence. Even the rest

of his classmates seemed shocked by the outburst, because they weren't even tittering with laughter. Mr. Portendorfer's reaction was over the top by anyone's standards, and for it to be directed at a new kid made it even worse. From the grumpy receptionist to the volatile English teacher, Oliver wondered if there was even a single nice person in this whole school!

Mr. Portendorfer began droning on about pronouns. Oliver hunkered down even further in his seat, feeling tense and unhappy. Luckily Mr. Portendorfer didn't pick on him anymore, but when the bell rang an hour later, his chastisement was still ringing in Oliver's ears.

Oliver trudged through the halls in search of his math classroom. When he found it, he made sure to beeline straight for the back row. If Mr. Portendorfer didn't know he had a new student, maybe the math teacher wouldn't either. Perhaps he could be invisible for the next hour.

To Oliver's relief it worked. He sat, silent and anonymous, throughout the whole class, like an algebra-obsessed ghost. But even that didn't feel like the best solution to his problems, Oliver thought. Being unnoticed was just as bad as being publicly humiliated. It made him feel insignificant.

The bell rang again. It was lunch, so Oliver followed his map down to the hall. If the playground had been intimidating it was nothing compared to the lunchroom. Here, the kids were like wild animals. Their raucous voices echoed off the walls, making the noise even more unbearable. Oliver bowed his head

and hurried toward the queue.

Smack. Suddenly, he slammed into a large, foreboding body. Slowly, Oliver raised his gaze.

To his surprise, it was Chris's face he was staring into. On either side of him, in a sort of arrow formation, were three boys and one girl all scowling the same scowl. *Cronies* was the word that sprang to Oliver's mind.

"You've made friends already?" Oliver said, trying not to sound surprised.

Chris narrowed his eyes. "Not all of us are antisocial loser freaks," he said.

Oliver realized then that this wasn't going to be a pleasant interaction with his brother. But then, it never was.

Chris looked over at his new cronies. "This is my pipsqueak brother, Oliver," he announced. Then he let out a belly laugh. "He sleeps in the alcove."

His new bully friends started to laugh too.

"He's available for swirlies, wedgies, headlocks, and my personal favorite," Chris continued. He grabbed Oliver, and pressed his knuckles into his head. "Noogies."

Oliver wriggled and thrashed in Chris's grasp. Locked in the horrible, painful headlock, Oliver remembered his powers from yesterday, the moment he'd broken the table leg and sent potatoes into Chris's lap. If he only knew how he'd summoned those powers he could do it now and break free. But he had no idea how he'd done it. All he'd done was visualize in his mind's eye

the table breaking, the plastic soldier flying through the air. Was that all it took? His imagination?

He attempted it now, picturing himself wrestling free from Chris. But it was no good. With Chris's new friends all watching on, laughing with glee, he was just too tuned into the reality of his humiliation to shift his mind to his imagination.

Finally, Chris let him go. Oliver staggered back, rubbing his sore head. He patted down his hair, which had become frizzy with static. But more than the humiliation of Chris's bullying, Oliver felt the sting of disappointment from failing to summon his powers. Maybe the whole kitchen table thing was just a coincidence. Maybe he didn't have any special powers at all.

The girl who was hovering next to Chris's shoulder spoke up. "Can't wait to get to know you better, Oliver." She said it in a menacing voice that Oliver could tell meant quite the opposite.

He'd been worried about bullies. Of course he should have anticipated the worst bully of all would be his brother.

Oliver shoved his way past Chris and his new friends and headed for the lunch queue. With a sad sigh, he grabbed a cheese sandwich from the fridge and headed, heavy-hearted, to the restroom. The toilet cubicle was the only place he felt safe.

*

Oliver's next lesson after lunch was science. He wandered the corridors looking for the correct room, his stomach churning

with the certainty that it would be just as bad as his first two classes.

When he found the classroom he knocked against the window. The teacher was younger than he'd been anticipating. Science teachers, in his experience, tended to be old and somewhat strange, but Ms. Belfry looked completely sane. She had long, straight, mousy brown hair, which was almost the same color as her cotton dress and cardigan. She turned at the sound of his knock and smiled, showing dimples on both cheeks, and beckoned him in. He opened the door timidly.

"Hello," Ms. Belfry said, smiling. "Are you Oliver?"

Oliver nodded. Even though he was the first one there, he felt suddenly very shy. At least this teacher seemed to be expecting him. That was a relief.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," Ms. Belfry said, holding out a hand for him to shake.

It was all very formal and not at all what Oliver was expecting considering what he'd experienced of Campbell Junior High so far. But he took her hand and shook. She had very warm skin and her friendly, respectful demeanor helped put him at ease.

"Did you get a chance to do any of the reading?" Ms. Belfry asked.

Oliver's eyes widened and he felt a little hitch of panic in his chest. "I didn't realize there was any reading."

"It's fine," Ms. Belfry said reassuringly, smiling her kind smile. "Not to worry. We're learning about scientists this term,

and some important historical figures.” She pointed at a black-and-white portrait on the wall. “This is Charles Babbage, he invented the...”

“...calculator,” Oliver finished.

Ms. Belfry beamed and clapped her hands. “You already know?”

Oliver nodded. “Yes. And he’s also often credited as the father of the computer, since it was his designs that led to their invention.” He looked at the next picture on the wall. “And that’s James Watt,” he said. “The inventor of the steam engine.”

Ms. Belfry nodded. She looked thrilled. “Oliver, I can already tell we’re going to get along famously.”

Just then, the door opened, and in poured Oliver’s classmates. He swallowed, his anxiety returning in a huge rush.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” Ms. Belfry suggested.

He nodded and hurried to the one closest to the window. If it all got too much, at the very least he could look out and imagine himself somewhere else. From here, he had a great view out over the neighborhood, at all the bits of trash and crispy fall leaves blowing in the wind. The clouds above looked even darker than they had that morning. It didn’t really help with Oliver’s sense of foreboding.

The rest of the kids in the class were very loud and very rowdy. It took a long time for Ms. Belfry to settle them down so she could start her lesson.

“Today, we’re carrying on from where we left off last week,”

she said, needing to raise her voice, Oliver noticed, in order to be heard over the din. “With some amazing inventors from World War Two. I wonder if anyone knows who this is?”

She held up a black-and-white photo of a woman whom Oliver had read about in his inventors book. Katharine Blodgett, who invented the gas mask, the smoke screen, and the non-reflective glass that was used for wartime submarine periscopes. After Armando Illstrom, Katharine Blodgett was one of Oliver’s favorite inventors, because he found all the technological advances she’d made in World War Two fascinating.

Just then, he noticed Ms. Belfry looking at him expectantly. She could probably tell from his face that he knew precisely who was in the picture. But after his experiences today, he was afraid to say anything aloud. His class would work out he was a nerd eventually; Oliver didn’t want to hurry the process.

But Ms. Belfry nodded at him, eager and encouraging. Against his better judgment, Oliver piped up.

“That’s Katharine Blodgett,” he said, finally.

Ms. Belfry’s grin burst onto her face, bringing her lovely dimples with it. “That’s correct, Oliver. Can you tell the class who she is? What she invented?”

Behind him, Oliver could hear chuckling. The kids were already cottoning on to his nerd status.

“She was an inventor during World War Two,” he said. “She created lots of useful and important wartime inventions, like submarine periscopes. And gas masks, which saved lots of

people's lives.”

Ms. Belfry looked thrilled with Oliver.

“FREAK!” someone shouted from the back.

“No, thank you, Paul,” Ms. Belfry said sternly to the boy who'd shouted. She turned to the board and began to write about Katharine Blodgett.

Oliver smiled to himself. After the librarian who'd gifted him the inventors book, Ms. Belfry was the kindest adult he'd ever met. Her enthusiasm was like a bulletproof shield Oliver could wrap around his shoulders, deflecting the rest of his class's cruel words. He settled into the class, more at ease than he'd been in days.

*

Sooner than he was expecting, the bell rang for the end of the day. Everyone hurried out, running and shouting. Oliver collected his things and made for the exit.

“Oliver, I'm very impressed with your knowledge,” Ms. Belfry said when she ran into him in the hallway. “Where did you learn about all these people?”

“I have a book,” he explained. “I like inventors. I want to be one.”

“Do you make your own inventions?” she asked, looking enthusiastic.

He nodded but didn't tell her about the invisibility coat. What

if she thought it was silly? He wouldn't be able to cope with seeing anything resembling mockery on her face.

"I think that's fantastic, Oliver," she said, nodding. "It's very important to have dreams to follow. Who is your favorite inventor?"

Oliver recalled Armando Illstrom's face in the faded picture in his book.

"Armando Illstrom," he said. "He's not very famous but he invented lots of cool things. He even tried to make a time machine."

"A time machine?" Ms. Belfry said, raising her eyebrows. "That's exciting."

Oliver nodded, feeling more able to open up thanks to her encouragement. "His factory is near here. I was thinking about going to visit him."

"You must," Ms. Belfry said, smiling her warm smile. "You see, when I was your age, I loved physics. All the other kids teased me, they didn't understand why I wanted to make circuits instead of play with dolls. But one day, my absolute favorite physicist came to town to record an episode of his TV show. I went along and spoke to him afterward. He told me to never give up on my passion. Even if other people told me I was weird to be interested in it, if I had a dream, I had to follow it. I wouldn't be here today had it not been for that conversation. Never underestimate how important it is to receive encouragement from someone who gets you, especially when it seems as though no

one else does.”

Ms. Belfry’s words struck Oliver powerfully. For the first time that day, he felt buoyant. He was now completely determined to find the factory and meet his hero face to face.

“Thanks, Ms. Belfry,” he said, grinning at her. “See you next class!”

And as he hurried away with a spring in his step, he heard Ms. Belfry call out, “Always follow your dreams!”

CHAPTER THREE

Oliver trudged toward the bus stop, fighting against the gusting winds. His mind was focused on his solace, on the one ray of light in this dark new chapter of his life: Armando Illstrom. If he could find the inventor and his factory, life would at least be bearable. Perhaps Armando Illstrom could be his ally. The sort of man who'd once attempted to invent a time machine would surely be the sort of person who'd get along with a boy trying to become invisible. Surely he, of anyone, could handle some of Oliver's idiosyncrasies. At the very least, he'd be a bigger nerd than Oliver was!

Oliver rummaged in his pocket and pulled out the slip of paper that he'd scribbled the factory address on. It was farther away from his school than he'd originally thought. He'd have to take a bus. He checked in his other pocket for some change and discovered he had just enough left over from lunch to pay for the journey. Relieved and filled with anticipation, he headed toward the bus stop.

As he waited for the bus, the wind around him roared. If it got any worse, he wouldn't be able to stand up straight. In fact, people who passed him were fighting to stay upright. Had he not been so drained from his first day at school, he might have found the sight amusing. But his focus was solely on the factory.

Finally, the bus arrived. It was an old, beat-up thing that had

seen better days.

Oliver climbed aboard and paid for his ticket, then took a seat right at the back. It smelled on the bus, of greasy fries and onions. Oliver's stomach growled, reminding him that he'd probably miss the dinner that would be waiting for him at home. Maybe spending money on a bus instead of some food was a foolish decision. But finding Armando's factory was the only ray of light in Oliver's otherwise bleak existence. If he didn't do this, then what was the point in any of it?

The bus hissed and juddered along the roads. Oliver looked out wistfully at the passing streets. Trash cans had been knocked on their sides and some even skidded along the roads, pushed along by the winds. The clouds above were so dark they were almost black.

The houses began to thin out and the view from his window became even more deserted and dilapidated. The bus stopped, letting off some passengers, then stopped again, this time to bid farewell to a tired mother and her wailing baby. After several stops, Oliver realized he was the only person left onboard. The silence felt eerie.

Finally, the bus passed a stop with a rusty, faded sign. Oliver realized that this was his stop. He jumped up and hurried to the front of the bus.

"Can I get off please?" he said.

The driver looked at him with sad, lazy eyes. "Ring the bell."

"I'm sorry, you want me to—"

“Ring the bell,” the driver repeated monotonously. “If you wanna get off the bus, you gotta ring the bell.”

Oliver let out a sigh of exasperation. He pressed the bell button. It dinged. He turned back to the driver, eyebrows raised expectantly. “Now can I get off?”

“At the next stop,” the driver said.

Oliver grew infuriated. “I wanted that stop!”

“Should’ve rung the bell sooner,” the bus driver replied in his lazy drawl.

Oliver clenched his fists with exasperation. But at last, he felt the bus begin to slow. It halted beside a sign that was so old it was nothing more than a square of rust. The door slowly creaked open.

“Thanks,” Oliver mumbled to the unhelpful driver.

He hurried down the steps and jumped down to the cracked sidewalk. He looked up at the sign but it was too rusty to read anything. He could just about make out some letters, typed in that old 1940s font that was popular during the war.

As the bus pulled away, coughing out a cloud of exhaust fumes, Oliver’s sense of loneliness began to intensify. But as the fumes dispersed, a very familiar-looking building appeared before him. It was the factory from the book! Armando Illstrom’s actual factory! He’d have recognized it anywhere. The old bus stop must have served the factory during its heyday. The bus driver’s stubbornness had actually done Oliver a huge favor, dropping him off at the exact spot he needed to be.

Except, Oliver realized as he peered up at the factory, it looked much the worse for wear. The large, rectangular factory sported several cracked windows. Through them Oliver could see that the inside was completely black. It appeared as if no one was inside at all.

Fear took hold of Oliver. What if Armando had passed? An inventor working during the Second World War would be very old now, and the chances of him having passed on were quite high. If his hero had indeed passed away, then what would there be to look forward to in life anymore?

A sense of desolation overcame Oliver as he walked toward the dilapidated warehouse. The closer he got, the more he could see. Every window on the ground floor was boarded up. A huge steel door was secured over what he recalled from the photo was the grand, main entryway. How was he supposed to get in?

Oliver started to skirt around the outside of the building, trudging through tangles of nettles and ivy growing around the perimeter. He found a small crack in one of the boarded up windows and peered inside, but it was too dim to see anything. He kept going, walking the perimeter of the building.

Once he was around the back, Oliver found another door. Unlike the others, this one had not been boarded up. In fact, it was standing partially ajar.

Heart in mouth, Oliver pushed the door. He felt it resist against his force, and it let out the distinctive loud, creaky sound of rusted metal. That was not a good sign, Oliver thought, as he

wincing against the unpleasant noise. If the door was in even semi-frequent use it shouldn't feel so stuck with rust, nor make such a sound.

With the door open just enough for him to squeeze through, Oliver wedged his body through the gap and popped into the factory. His footsteps echoed as he was propelled forward a few steps from the effort of shoving himself through the small gap.

Inside the warehouse, it was pitch black, and Oliver's eyes had not yet adjusted to the sudden change in light. Practically blinded by the dimness, Oliver felt his sense of smell heighten to compensate. He became aware of the odors of dust and metal, and the distinctive smell of an abandoned building.

He waited with bated breath for his eyes to finally adjust to the light. When they did, though, it was only enough to see a few feet in front of his face. He began to step carefully through the factory.

Oliver gasped with wonder as he came across a huge contraption of wood and metal, like an oversized cooking pot. He touched the side and the bowl began to swing like a pendulum in its metal frame. It spun as well, making Oliver think it had something to do with mapping the solar system and the movement of planets around it, spinning on several axes. What the contraption was actually for, though, Oliver had no idea.

He stepped on further and found another strange-looking object. It was made of a column of metal but with a type of mechanically operated arm coming out the top of it and a claw in

the shape of a hand at the bottom. Oliver tried the turning wheel and the arm began to move.

Just like an arcade game, Oliver thought.

It moved like the ones with motorized arms and a claw that you could never catch a stuffed toy with. This was much bigger, though, as if it had been designed for much more than just scooping up objects.

Oliver touched each of the fingers on the claw-like hand. Each had the exact number of joints as a real hand would have, and each part moved when he pushed it. Oliver wondered if Armando Illstrom had been trying to make his own robot, but decided it made more sense that it was his attempt at an automaton. He'd read all about them; wind-up machines in human form that could perform specific preplanned actions, like writing or typing.

Oliver kept walking. All around him, great machines stood still and imposing, like giant beasts frozen in time. They were made of a combination of materials like wood and metal, and consisted of many different parts, like cogs and springs, levers and pulleys. Cobwebs hung from them. Oliver tried some of the mechanisms, disturbing a variety of insects that had made home in the shadowy crevices of the machines.

But the feeling of wonder started to wear off as it began to dawn on Oliver, with a horrible sense of despair, that the factory had indeed fallen into disrepair. And not recently. It must have been decades ago by the looks of the thickness of the dust and the build-up of cobwebs, by the way the mechanisms creaked, and by

the vast number of bugs that had taken up residence within them.

With a growing sense of distress, Oliver hurried around the rest of the factory, peeking with diminishing hope into side rooms and down darkened corridors. There were no signs of life.

He stood there, in the dark, empty warehouse, surrounded by the relics of a man he now knew he would never meet. He'd needed Armando Illstrom. He'd needed a savior who could lift him out of his gloom. But it had just been a dream. And now that dream was dashed.

*

Oliver spent the entire bus journey home feeling wounded and deflated. He was too miserable to even read his book.

He reached his bus stop and stepped out into the drizzly evening. Rain beat down on his head, soaking him through. He hardly even noticed, so consumed was he with his misery.

When he reached his new home, Oliver remembered that he didn't have his own key yet. Going inside seemed like an extra cruel blow to an already desperately sad day. But he had no choice. He knocked on the door and braced himself.

The door was opened in one swift motion. There, in front of him, grinning demonically, stood Chris.

"You're late for dinner," he said, glowering, flickers of delight behind his eyes. "Mom and Dad are flipping out."

From behind Chris, Oliver could hear his mom's shrill voice.

“Is that him? Is that Oliver?”

Chris shouted back over his shoulder. “Yeah. And he looks like a drowned rat.”

He looked back again at Oliver, his expression one of glee for the approaching confrontation. Oliver shoved his way inside, pushing past Chris’s big, meaty body. A trail of drips came off his sodden clothes, making a puddle beneath his feet.

Mom hurried into the corridor and stood at the opposite end staring at him. Oliver couldn’t work out if her expression was relief or fury.

“Hi, Mom,” he said meekly.

“Look at you!” she exclaimed. “Where have you been?”

If it was relief to see her son back home then she didn’t follow it up with a hug or anything like that. Oliver’s mother didn’t do hugs.

“I had something to do after school,” Oliver replied, evasively. He peeled his soggy sweater off.

“Nerd class?” Chris piped up. Then he laughed raucously at his own joke.

Mom held her hand out for Oliver’s sweater. “Give that here. I’ll need to wash it.” She sighed loudly. “Now get inside. Your dinner’s going cold.”

She ushered Oliver into the living room. Immediately, Oliver noticed that the things in his alcove had been messed with, moved around. At first he thought it was because a mattress had been dragged into place, and everything dumped on top, but then he

saw the slingshot lying on his blanket. Beside it was his suitcase, the locks busted, its lid sitting ajar. And then he saw with horror that all the coils for his invisibility coat had been strewn all over the floor, bent out of shape as though they'd been stomped on.

Oliver knew instantly that this had been Chris's doing. He glared over at him. His brother was watching expectantly for his reaction.

“Did you do this?” Oliver demanded.

Chris shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels, in a picture of innocence. He shrugged. “I have no idea what you're talking about,” he said with a telling smirk.

It was the final straw. After everything that had happened over the last two days, with the move, and the horrible school experience, and the loss of his hero, Oliver just didn't have the reserves to cope with this. Fury exploded inside of him. Before he'd even had a chance to think, Oliver went barreling toward Chris.

He slammed into his brother, hard. Chris barely even staggered backward from the force; he was so big and had clearly been expecting Oliver to lash out at him. And he was clearly relishing Oliver's attempts to fight him, because he laughed maniacally. He was so much bigger than Oliver that all it took was for him to place a hand on Oliver's head and shove him backward. Oliver flailed helplessly, none of his swipes coming even close to connecting with Chris.

From the kitchen table, Dad called out, “BOYS! STOP

FIGHTING!”

“It’s Oliver,” Chris shouted back. “He attacked me for no reason.”

“You know exactly what the reason is!” Oliver yelled, his fists flying through the air, unable to reach Chris’s body.

“Me trampling on your weird little coils?” Chris hissed, quiet enough so that neither of his parents could hear him. “Or breaking that stupid slingshot? You’re such a freak, Oliver!”

Oliver had exhausted himself fighting against Chris. He backed off, panting.

“I HATE this family!” Oliver cried.

He rushed to his alcove, picking up all the damaged coils and broken bits of wire, the snapped levers and bent metal, throwing them into his suitcase.

His parents thundered over.

“How dare you!” Dad shouted.

“You take that back!” Mom cried.

“Now you’ve really done it,” Chris said, grinning wickedly.

As they all screamed at him, Oliver knew there was only one place he could escape to. His dreamworld, the place in his imagination.

He squeezed his eyes shut and muted out their voices.

Then suddenly he was there, at the factory. Not the cobwebby one he’d visited earlier, but a clean version, where all the machines gleamed and glistened under bright lights.

Oliver stood there gawking at the factory in all its former

glory. But just like in real life, there was no Armando there to greet him. No ally. No friend. Even in his imagination, he was completely alone.

*

Only once everyone had gone to bed and the house was in complete darkness did Oliver feel able to work on fixing his inventions. He wanted to be optimistic as he fiddled with all the pieces, trying to get them to fit back together. But it was useless. The whole thing had been destroyed. All his coils and wires were damaged beyond hope. He'd have to start all over again.

He threw the pieces into his suitcase and slammed it shut. With both the locks now broken, the lid bounced up before falling back again and standing ajar. Oliver sighed heavily and slumped back against his mattress. He pulled the blanket all the way up over his head.

It must only have been from sheer exhaustion that Oliver was even able to fall asleep that night. But sleep he did. And as he drifted off into his dreams, Oliver found himself standing at the window looking out at the spindly tree across the road. There stood the man and woman he'd seen just last night, holding hands.

Oliver banged on the window.

“Who are you?” he cried.

The woman smiled knowingly. Her smile was kind; nicer,

even, than Ms. Belfry's.

But neither of them spoke. They just stared at him, smiling.

Oliver heaved the window open. "Who are you?" he shouted again, but this time his voice was drowned out by the wind.

The man and woman just stood there, mute, their hands clasped, their smiles warm and inviting.

Oliver began to crawl through the window. But as he did, the figures flickered and juddered, as if they were holograms and the lightbulbs were flickering out. They were starting to disappear.

"Wait!" he cried. "Don't go!"

He fell through the window and hurried across the street. They faded more and more with every step he took.

As he drew up ahead of them, they were barely visible. He reached forward for the woman's hand, but his went straight through hers, like she was a ghost.

"Please tell me who you are!" he pleaded.

The man opened his mouth to speak, but his voice was drowned out by the roaring wind. Oliver grew desperate.

"Who are you?" he asked again, shouting to be heard over the wind. "Why are you watching me?"

The man and woman were rapidly fading. The man spoke again, and this time Oliver heard a small whisper.

"You have a destiny..."

"What?" Oliver stammered. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

But before either of them had a chance to speak again, they

faded out entirely. They'd gone.

"Come back!" Oliver yelled into the emptiness.

Then, as if speaking into his ear, he heard the wispy voice of the woman say, "You will save mankind."

Oliver's eyes fluttered open. He was back in his alcove bed, bathed in the pale, blue light coming in through the window. It was morning. He could feel his heart thrumming.

The dream had shaken him to the core. What had they meant about him having a destiny? About saving mankind? And who were the man and woman anyway? Figments of his imagination, or something else? It was all too much to fathom.

As the initial shock of the dream began to wear off, Oliver felt a new sensation take over. Hope. Somewhere, deep inside of him, he felt that he was about to experience a momentous day, that everything was about to change.

CHAPTER FOUR

Oliver's good mood was elevated further when he realized his first class of the day was science, and that meant he'd get to see Ms. Belfry again. Even as he crossed the playground, ducking beneath basketballs that he suspected were deliberately being aimed at his head, Oliver's sense of excitement only grew.

He reached the staircase and succumbed to the force of the children, who pushed him like a surfer all the way up to the fourth floor. Then he pushed his way out onto the landing and headed for the classroom.

He was first. Ms. Belfry was inside already, in a gray linen dress, setting up a row of small models across the front of her desk. Oliver saw there was a little biplane, a hot air balloon, a space rocket, and a modern airplane.

"Is today's lesson about flight?" he asked.

Ms. Belfry startled, clearly not having realized one of her students had entered.

"Oh, Oliver," she said, beaming. "Good morning. Yes, it is. Now, I suspect you know a thing or two about these kinds of inventions."

Oliver nodded. His inventors book had a whole section on flight, from the first balloons invented by the French Montgolfier brothers, through to the Wright Brothers' early airplane design, and all the way up to rocket science. Like the rest of the pages

of the book, he'd read this section so many times he had most of it committed to memory.

Ms. Belfry smiled like she'd already guessed Oliver would be a fountain of knowledge on this particular subject.

"You might have to help me explain some of the physics to the others," she told him.

Oliver blushed as he took his seat. He hated speaking out loud in front of his classmates, especially since he was already a suspected nerd and confirming it felt like he was flaunting more than he really wanted to. But Ms. Belfry did have a very calming way about her, as though she thought Oliver's knowledge was something to be celebrated rather than ridiculed.

Oliver chose a seat near the front of the class. If he *was* going to be forced to speak aloud, he'd prefer not to have thirty pairs of eyes gawking at him over their shoulders as he did. At least this way he'd only be aware of the four other kids in the front row looking at him.

Just then, Oliver's classmates started filing in and taking their seats. The noise in the room began to swell. Oliver never understood how other people had so much to talk about. Though he could talk about inventors and inventions forever, there wasn't much else he felt the need to chat about. It always baffled him how other people managed such easy conversation, and how they shared so many words on what, in his mind, sounded like next to nothing of importance.

Ms. Belfry began her class, waving her arms in an attempt

to get everyone to shut up. Oliver felt terrible for her. It always seemed like a battle just to get the kids to listen. And she was so gentle and soft-spoken that she never resorted to raising her voice or shouting, so her attempts to quiet everyone took ages to work. But eventually, the chatter began to die away.

“Today, children,” Ms. Belfry began, “I have a problem that needs solving.” She held up a popsicle stick. “I wonder if anyone can tell me how to make this fly.”

A ripple of hubbub went around the room. Someone shouted out.

“Just throw it!”

Ms. Belfry did as was suggested. The popsicle stick traveled less than two feet before falling to the ground.

“Hmm, I don’t know about you guys,” Ms. Belfry said, “but to me that just looked like falling. I want it to *fly*. To soar through the air, not just plummet to the ground.”

Paul, Oliver’s taunter from last class, called out the next suggestion. “Why don’t you just ping it on an elastic band? Like a slingshot.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ms. Belfry said with a nod. “But I haven’t told you something. This stick is actually ten feet long.”

“Then make a ten-foot-wide catapult!” someone shouted.

“Or put rocket launchers on it!” another voice chimed in.

The class started to laugh. Oliver shifted in his seat. He knew exactly how the popsicle stick could fly. It all came down to physics.

Ms. Belfry managed to get the class to settle down again.

“This was the exact problem facing the Wright brothers when they were trying to create the first airplane. How to mimic the flight of birds. How to turn this”—she held up the stick horizontally—“into wings that could sustain flight. So, does anyone know how they did it?”

Her gaze flicked immediately to Oliver. He swallowed. As much as he didn't want to speak aloud, another part of him desperately wanted to prove to Ms. Belfry how smart he was.

“You need to create lift,” he said, quietly.

“What was that?” Ms. Belfry said, although Oliver knew full well she'd heard him perfectly.

Reticently, he spoke a little louder. “You need to create lift.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Oliver felt a blush creep into his cheeks. He felt the change in the room, the tenseness of the other students around him. So much for not having thirty pairs of eyes gawking at him; Oliver could practically feel them burning into his back.

“And what is *lift*?” Ms. Belfry continued.

Oliver wet his dry lips and swallowed his anguish. “Lift is the name of the force that counters gravity. Gravity is always pulling objects down to the center of the earth. Lift is the force that counteracts it.”

From somewhere behind, he heard Paul's whispered voice in a mock whine, mimicking, “Lift counteracts it.”

A tittering of laughter rippled amongst the students behind

him. Oliver felt his muscles stiffen defensively in response.

Ms. Belfry was clearly oblivious to the quiet mocking Oliver was experiencing.

“Hmm,” she said, as if this was all news to her. “Sounds complicated. Countering gravity? Isn’t that impossible?”

Oliver shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. He really wanted to stop speaking, to have a small respite from the whispers. But clearly no one else knew the answer, and Ms. Belfry was watching him with her sparkling, encouraging eyes.

“Not at all,” Oliver replied, finally taking the bait. “To create lift all you have to do is change how fast air flows around something, which you can do just by changing the shape of the object. So with your popsicle stick, you just need a ridge on the top side. That means that as the stick moves forward the air flowing above and below it have different-shaped paths. Over the humped side of the wing the path is curved, whereas beneath the wing, the path is flat and uninterrupted.”

Oliver finished speaking and immediately pressed his lips together. Not only had he answered her question, he’d gone above and beyond in explaining it. He’d gotten carried away with himself and now he was going to be mocked mercilessly. He braced himself.

“Could you draw it for us?” Ms. Belfry asked.

She held out a board pen for Oliver. He looked at it, wide-eyed. Speaking was one thing, but standing in front of everyone like a target was a whole other!

“I’d prefer not to,” he muttered out the side of his mouth.

He saw the flicker of understanding in Ms. Belfry’s expression. She must have realized she’d pushed him to the edge of his comfort zone, beyond it even, and what she was asking him now was an impossibility.

“Actually,” she said, withdrawing the pen and stepping backward, “maybe someone else would like to try drawing what Oliver’s explained?”

Samantha, one of the brash kids who craved attention, leapt up and snatched the pen from Ms. Belfry. Together they went over to the board and Ms. Belfry helped Samantha draw a diagram of what Oliver was describing.

But as soon as Ms. Belfry’s back was turned, Oliver felt something hit the back of his head. He turned and saw a ball of screwed up paper at his feet. He reached down and picked it up, not wanting to open it, knowing there’d be a cruel note inside.

“Hey...” Paul hissed. “Don’t ignore me. Read the note!”

Tensing, Oliver opened up the paper ball in his hands. He smoothed it on the desk before him. Written in terrible spider-crawl handwriting were the words *Guess what else can fly?*

Just then, he felt something else hit his head. Another paper ball. It was followed by another, and another and another.

“HEY!” Oliver cried, leaping up and turning around angrily.

Ms. Belfry turned too. She frowned at the scene before her.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“We’re just trying to find things that fly,” Paul said innocently.

“One must have hit Oliver by accident.”

Ms. Belfry looked skeptical. “Oliver?” she asked, turning her gaze to him.

Oliver sat back down in his seat, hunkering down. “It’s true,” he mumbled.

By now, the boisterous Samantha had finished her diagram, and Ms. Belfry was able to turn her attention back to the class. She pointed at the board, where there was now a diagram of a wing, not straight but curved like a sideways stretched teardrop. Two dotted lines indicated the paths of air passing above the wing and below it. The flow of air going over the humped wing looked different in comparison to the flow going directly under it.

“Like this?” Ms. Belfry said. “But I still don’t understand how that produces *lift*.”

Oliver knew all too well that Ms. Belfry knew all this, but having just been pelted by paper balls had made him reluctant to speak again.

Then he realized something. Nothing he did was going to stop the teasing. Either he sat there silently and got picked on for doing nothing, or he spoke up and got picked on for his intelligence. He realized then which he’d prefer.

“Because with the air following in different paths like that, it creates a downward force,” he explained. “And if we take Isaac Newton’s third law of motion—that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction—you can see how the resulting reaction to that force, to the downward force, is that the air

traveling under the wing creates lift.”

He folded his arms and sat back against the chair.

Ms. Belfry looked triumphant. “That’s quite right, Oliver.”

She turned back to the drawing and added arrows. Oliver felt a paper ball hit his head but this time he didn’t even react. He didn’t care anymore what his classmates thought of him. In fact, they were probably just jealous that he had brains and knew cool stuff like Isaac Newton’s laws of physics when all they could manage was screwing up a ball of paper and aiming it at someone’s head.

He folded his arms more tightly and, ignoring the paper balls smacking him in the head, focused on Ms. Belfry’s image. She was drawing an arrow pointing down. Beside it she wrote *downward force*. The other arrow she’d drawn pointed up with the word *lift*.

“What about hot air balloons?” a voice challenged from behind. “They don’t work that way at all, but they still fly.”

Oliver turned in his seat, searching for the owner of the voice. It was a grumpy-looking kid—dark, bushy eyebrows, dimpled chin—who had joined Paul in throwing the paper balls.

“Well, that’s a completely different law at play,” Oliver explained. “That works because hot air rises. The Montgolfier brothers, who invented the hot air balloon, realized that if you trap the air inside some kind of envelope, like a balloon, it becomes buoyant due to the lower density of hot air inside compared to cold air outside.”

The boy just looked more angry at Oliver’s explanation. “Well,

what about rockets?” he challenged further. “They’re not buoyant or whatever you just said. They go up, though. And they fly. How does that work, smarty pants?”

Oliver just smiled. “That comes back to Isaac Newton’s third law of motion again. Only this time the force involved is propulsion, not lift. Propulsion is the same thing that moves a steam train. A big blast out one end produces an opposite reaction of propulsion. Only with a rocket it’s got to get all the way to space, so the blast has to be really massive.”

Oliver could feel himself growing excited as he spoke about these things. Even though all the kids were staring at him like he was a freak, he didn’t care.

He turned back in his seat to face the front. There, smiling proudly, stood Ms. Belfry.

“And do you know what all these inventors had in common?” she said. “The Montgolfiers and the Wrights and Robert Goddard, who launched the first liquid-propellant-fueled rocket? I’ll tell you what. They did things they’d been told were impossible! Their inventions were crazy. Imagine someone saying that we could use the same principles of ancient Chinese catapults to launch a man into space! And yet they became groundbreaking inventors, whose inventions have changed the world, and the whole trajectory of humankind!”

Oliver knew she was speaking to him, telling him that no matter what people did or said, he should never be cowed into silence.

Then something remarkable happened. In response to Ms. Belfry's passion and enthusiasm, the class fell into stunned silence. It wasn't the tense silence of a poised attack, but the humbled silence of having learned something inspiring.

Oliver felt a swell in his stomach. Ms. Belfry really was the most awesome teacher. She was the only person who'd shown anywhere near the level of excitement he had for physics and science and inventors, and her excitement even managed to silence his rowdy classmates, if only temporarily.

Just then, a huge gust of wind made the window panes rattle. Everyone jumped in unison and turned their eyes toward the gray skies outside.

"Looks like the storm is going to hit soon," Ms. Belfry said.

No sooner had she spoken, than the voice of the principal came over the speaker.

"Students, we've just received a warning from the National Weather Service. This is going to be the storm of the century, the likes of which we've never seen before. We really don't know what to expect. So to be on the safe side, the mayor is canceling classes for the day."

Everyone started shouting excitedly and Oliver strained to hear the final words of the principal's announcement.

"The storm is due to hit within the next hour. There are buses outside. Please head straight home. The official warning is to not be outside when the storm hits in approximately one hour. This is a city-wide warning so your parents will be expecting you home.

Anyone caught truanting will face suspension.”

Around Oliver, no one seemed to care. All they'd heard was that school was out and they were going to make the most of it. They grabbed their books and hurried out of the classroom like a stampede of buffaloes.

Oliver collected his own things more slowly.

“You did great today,” Ms. Belfry told him as she placed all of her little models into her bag. “Are you okay getting home?” She looked concerned about his welfare.

Oliver nodded to reassure her. “I'll get the bus with everyone else,” he said, realizing as he did that that might mean enduring a journey with Chris. He shuddered.

Oliver swung the strap of his backpack over his shoulder and followed the rest of the school kids outside. The sky was so dark, it was practically black. It felt very ominous.

Head bowed, Oliver started walking toward the bus stop. But just then, he caught sight of something behind him, something far more scary than a black tropical storm cloud: Chris. And running alongside him were his cronies.

Oliver turned and bolted. He headed straight toward the first bus in the queue. The bus was crammed with kids and clearly ready to leave. Not even checking to see where it was going, Oliver threw himself onboard.

Just in time as well. The mechanism hissed and the door shut behind him. A split second later, Chris appeared on the other side, glowering menacingly. His cronies drew up beside

him and they all glared at Oliver through the door, which was really nothing more than a thin shield of protective glass.

The bus set off, moving Oliver away from their fierce faces.

He peered out the window as the bus moved away and began picking up speed. To Oliver's dismay, Chris and his cronies barged their way straight onto the bus waiting behind. It, too, pulled away from school, following closely.

Oliver gulped with dread. With Chris and his friends just one bus behind, he knew that if they saw him get off, they would too. Then they'd pounce and he'd be in for a pummeling. He chewed his lip with worry, not knowing what to do next. If only his invisibility coat really existed. Now was the time to use it!

With a huge crack, the sky seemed to open. Rain cascaded down and lightning streaked across the sky. So much for an hour before it hit, Oliver thought. The storm was already upon them.

The bus wove perilously along the road. Oliver gripped the metal pole and bumped shoulders with the kids standing around him. Things had gone from feeling ominous to feeling suddenly quite scary.

Another bolt of lightning jagged across the sky. Kids on the bus yelled out in fear.

Oliver realized then that perhaps he could use the storm to his advantage. Since getting off at his own stop was out of the question with Chris's cronies watching on, he'd have to get off unexpectedly. Blend in with the crowd. And with the pounding rain and general disorientation, that might just be possible.

At that exact moment, the bus slowed to a halt. A large group of kids surged forward for the door. Oliver looked around and saw they were just on the outskirts of the good neighborhood, which appeared to be where the majority of Campbell Junior High pupils lived. Oliver didn't know the neighborhood particularly well, but he had a vague idea of where it was in relation to his own.

So he followed the crowd, hopping off the bus at an unfamiliar stop. Rain lashed down on him and the others. He tried to stick with the crowd, but to his despair, everyone dispersed in different directions, and quickly too, to escape the weather. Before Oliver could even blink, he was left standing on the sidewalk completely exposed.

Not even a second later, the second bus pulled into the stop. Oliver saw Chris through the steamed up window. Then Chris clearly saw Oliver, because he started pointing excitedly and shouting something to his friends. Oliver didn't need an interpreter to know what Chris's gesticulations meant. He was coming for him.

Oliver ran.

He didn't have much of an idea where he was, but he ran anyway, heading in what he was certain was the vague direction of home.

Without looking behind, Oliver ran and ran. The rain and wind beat him, making it hard going, but this was one of the few occasions where being small was an advantage. Chris

would struggle to drag his lumbering body around, Oliver knew, whereas he was sprightly.

But, Oliver realized, Chris wasn't his only problem. All his friends were with him. The girl in particular was a very fast runner. Oliver stole a glance over his shoulder and saw that she was gaining on him.

Oliver passed some stores, then turned into an alleyway leading to their back streets. He dodged and weaved through obstacles such as abandoned shopping carts and empty boxes that had been swept up in the winds.

Then he rounded a corner. For a brief moment, he was out of sight of the approaching bullies.

As a strong blast knocked over a garbage can, Oliver had a sudden burst of inspiration. Without a moment's hesitation, he leapt inside the can, crawling over rotten food and empty wrappers until he was completely out of sight. Then he curled into a ball and waited.

The girl's feet appeared on the strip of sidewalk he could see. She stopped and paced in a full circle, as if looking for him. Then Oliver heard more pounding footsteps and saw that she'd been joined by Chris and the other cronies.

"Where did he go?" he heard one of them shout.

"How did you lose him?" came Chris's distinct voice.

"He was here one second and gone the next!" the girl yelled back.

Oliver stayed very still. His heart was hammering and his

limbs were shaking from all the exertion.

“He’s done one of his spells,” Chris said.

In his stinky, shadowy trash can, Oliver frowned. What did Chris mean?

“That’s so creepy,” the girl said. “You mean he made himself disappear?”

“I told you, didn’t I?” Chris replied. “He’s some kind of freak.”

“Maybe he’s possessed,” one of the boys said.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Chris shot back. “He’s not possessed. But there’s something wrong with him. Now do you believe me?”

“I do,” the girl said, but Oliver noticed that her voice was coming from farther away.

He peered to where her feet had been and saw they’d now disappeared from sight. Chris and his cronies were leaving.

Oliver waited. Even after their disparaging conversation about him faded to nothing, he didn’t want to leave the safety of the trash can. There was still a chance one of them was waiting, just in case he was about to reveal his hiding place.

Soon, the rain started to really come down. Oliver could hear it pounding heavily against the metal trash can. Only then did he accept that Chris would definitely have left. Even if he did want to beat Oliver up, he wouldn’t stand in the pouring rain in order to do it, and Oliver was quite certain his cronies wouldn’t be convinced to either.

Finally deciding he was safe, Oliver started to leave the trash can. But just as he wriggled toward the front of it, a huge gust of

wind started up. It battered him right back inside. Then the wind must have changed direction, because suddenly Oliver felt the can lurch beneath him. The wind was so strong, it was making him roll!

Oliver gripped the edges of his metal prison. Filled with terror, disorientated, he started to go round and round and round. He felt sick with panic, sick from the motion. Oliver willed it to end soon but it seemed to go on and on. He was thrashed about, jerked around.

Suddenly, Oliver's head thunked the side of the trash can very hard. Stars appeared in his eyes. He closed them. Then everything went black.

*

Oliver's eyes fluttered open and took in the sight of the spherical metal prison around him. The spinning motion had stopped but he could still hear the roaring sound of the storm all around him. He blinked, disorientated, his head pounding from the blow that had knocked him out.

He had no idea for how long he'd been unconscious but he was covered in stinking garbage. His stomach swilled with nausea.

Quickly, Oliver shuffled toward the front of the can and peered out. The sky was dark and rain lashed down like a sheet of gray.

Oliver scrambled out of the trash can. It was freezing and

it took barely seconds for him to become soaked through. He rubbed his arms in an attempt to get some warmth into them. Shivering, Oliver looked around, trying to discern his location.

Suddenly it dawned on him where he was, where the can had rolled him to during the storm. He was at the factory! Only this time, Oliver noticed, there were lights glowing inside.

His mouth fell open. Was he seeing things? Maybe he'd gotten a concussion from the blow to his head.

The rain continued to lash against Oliver. The lights in the factory glowed like some kind of beacon, drawing him to it.

Oliver hurried forward. He reached the grass around the factory, and it squelched beneath his feet, turned swampy from the downpour. Then he skirted around the side of the warehouse, trampling on the ivy and nettles in his haste to get to the back door, to shelter. He found the door just as he'd left it; ajar, and just wide enough from him to squeeze through. Quickly, he did, and found himself in the same darkened room, with the same smell of dust, the same echo of abandonment.

Oliver paused, relieved to be out of the rain. He waited for his eyes to adjust. Once they had, he saw that everything was just as it had been last time he'd been here, with dusty, cobwebbed machines disused and in disrepair. Except...

Oliver noticed a very thin, straight yellow line running across the floor. Not paint, but light. A shard of light. Well, Oliver knew that a shard of light needed a source, and so he hurried to it, following it like it was a trail of breadcrumbs. It ran all the way

up to a solid brick wall.

How bizarre, Oliver thought as he stopped and pressed his fingers against the wall. *Light isn't supposed to travel through objects.*

He fumbled around in the dim light, trying to work out how light could pass through a solid object. Then suddenly his hand touched something different. A handle?

Oliver felt a sudden surge of hope strike him. He heaved the handle and jumped back as a huge creaking noise sounded out.

The ground shook. Oliver wobbled, attempting to stay upright as the very ground moved beneath his feet.

He was turning. Not just him, but the wall too. It must have been built on a turntable! And as it turned, a huge shard of golden light burst out.

Oliver blinked in the sudden, blinding brightness. His legs felt unsteady beneath him from the motion of the turning floor.

Then, no sooner had it started than the movement stopped. There was a click as the wall found its new position. Oliver staggered, this time from the sudden deceleration.

He looked about him and was stunned by what he saw. He was now standing in a whole new wing of the factory. It was filled with incredible, fantastical inventions! Not the cobwebbed, creaking, rusted relics from the warehouse before, but instead, floor to ceiling, as far as the eye could see, stood bright, gleaming, new, ginormous machines.

Oliver couldn't help himself. Filled with excitement, he ran

up to the first machine. It had a moveable arm that spun right over his head. He ducked just in time, and saw the hand on the end of the arm deposit a boiled egg into an egg cup. Just beside it, two disembodied automaton hands bounced along the keys of a piano, while beside them a very large brass clockwork metronome ticked out the beat.

He was so preoccupied and delighted by the inventions around him, Oliver didn't even notice the strange bowl-shaped item from yesterday, nor the man tinkering away with it. It was only when a clockwork cuckoo took flight, making him stagger backward and bump straight into the man, that Oliver even became aware that he was not alone.

Oliver gasped and spun on the spot. Suddenly he realized who he was looking at. Though many years older than the picture in his book, Oliver knew he was staring into the eyes of Armando Illstrom.

Oliver gasped. He couldn't believe it. His hero was really here, standing before him, alive and well!

"Ah!" Armando said, smiling. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

CHAPTER FIVE

Oliver blinked, stunned by what he was seeing. Unlike the dusty, cobwebbed part of the factory that existed on the other side of the mechanized wall, the factory this side was bright and warm, glistening with cleanliness and brimming with the signs of life.

“Are you cold?” Armando asked. “You look like you’ve been in the rain.”

Oliver’s gaze flicked back to the inventor. He was shocked to actually be standing face to face with his hero. Even as the seconds ticked by, he was completely tongue-tied.

Oliver tried to say, “I have,” but the only sound that came from his throat was a garbled kind of grunt.

“Come, come,” Armando said. “I’ll fix you up a hot drink.”

Though unmistakably the Armando from his inventors book, his face had been ravished by time. Oliver made some quick calculations in his head; he knew from his inventors book that Armando’s factory was up and running during World War Two, and that Armando himself had been a young man of barely twenty years old during the factory’s heyday, which meant he had to now be well into his nineties! He noticed for the first time that Armando had a walking stick to support his frail body.

Oliver began to follow Armando across the factory floor, the lighting too dim for him to work out what exactly the large

shadowy shapes around him were, though he suspected they were more of Armando's glorious inventions, working ones, unlike those on the other side of the mechanized wall.

They went down a corridor and Oliver was still unable to really believe that any of this was real. He kept expecting to wake up any moment and discover this was a dream caused by him knocking his head in the trash can.

Making matters feel even more fantastical and unreal to Oliver was the factory itself. It was designed like a rabbit's warren, a labyrinth filled with doors and arches and corridors and stairs, all leading away from the main factory floor. Even when he'd walked the entire external perimeter of the factory the previous day he hadn't noticed anything odd in its architecture, no signs of external staircases and the like. But the factory itself was so huge, he reasoned, that from the outside it just looked like an enormous brick rectangular prism. No one would guess from the outside how the interior was designed. Nor would anyone expect it. He knew Armando was supposed to be zany, but the way his factory was structured was downright bizarre!

Oliver glanced left and right as he walked, seeing through one door a huge machine that resembled Charles Babbage's early prototype computer. Through another door was a room with a steepled roof, like a church, and a mezzanine level, upon which, directed toward a huge glass window, was a row of enormous brass telescopes.

Oliver continued following the doddery inventor, his breath

continually catching in his throat. He peered into another room they passed. It was filled with eerily human-looking automatons. Then the next contained an entire military tank, which was mounted with the strangest-looking weapons Oliver had ever seen.

“Don’t mind Horatio,” Armando said suddenly. Oliver jumped, breaking once again from his reverie.

He looked about him for the so-called Horatio, his mind conjuring up all kinds of machines that may have earned the name, until he noticed a sad-looking bloodhound lying in a basket by his feet.

Armando continued speaking. “His arthritis is worse than mine, poor thing. It makes him very grouchy.”

Oliver gave the dog a quick glance. Horatio sniffed the air as he passed, then settled back down to sleep with a weary sigh.

Armando hobbled stiffly into a small kitchen area, leading Oliver in after him. It was a modest space and very messy; the sort of kitchen you’d expect of a man who’d put the last seventy years of his focus into inventing zany machines that didn’t work.

Oliver blinked under the flickering fluorescent lights.

“Do you like tomato soup?” Armando asked suddenly.

“Uh...” Oliver said, still too tongue-tied to actually speak, to even really comprehend the fact that his hero was offering to make him soup of all things.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Armando said, smiling kindly.

Oliver watched him fetch two cans of soup from a cupboard

whose door was barely still on its hinges. Then he took a contraption from a drawer that resembled a can opener in design but was so big it required two hands to operate.

“There’s a reason why they say there’s no need to reinvent the wheel,” Armando said with a chuckle when he noticed Oliver’s curious expression.

Finally the cans were open and Armando set to work simmering the soup in a pot on the little gas hob. Oliver found himself completely frozen, unable to speak or even move. All he could do was stare at this man, at the real, living, breathing version of his hero. He even pinched himself a couple of times just to make sure. But it was real. He was really here. Really with Armando Illstrom.

“Please sit,” Armando said as he came over and placed two bowls of soup on the rickety table. “Eat.”

Oliver at the very least could remember how to sit down. He took his seat, feeling very odd indeed. Armando lowered himself slowly into the seat opposite. Oliver noticed the misty quality in his eyes and the patches of discolored skin on his face. All the telltale marks of old age. When Armando laid his hands on the tabletop, all his finger joints looked red and swollen from arthritis.

Oliver’s stomach growled as steam from the soup wafted into his face. Even though he was so shocked and befuddled by everything, his hunger drive took over, and before he’d even had time to think, he’d grabbed his spoon and taken a huge mouthful

of hot, flavorful soup. It was very tasty and nourishing. Far better than anything his parents ever cooked. He took another spoonful, not even caring that the soup was burning the roof of his mouth.

“Nice?” Armando asked encouragingly, eating his own soup at a much slower pace.

Oliver managed to employ a modicum of restraint and paused between mouthfuls to nod.

“Hopefully you’ll warm up soon,” Armando added, kindly.

Oliver couldn’t be sure if he meant warm up from the chilly rain or warm up socially. He hadn’t really said much since he’d gotten here, but he was so muddled from the storm, then so surprised to see Armando in the flesh, that his faculty for speech had completely failed him!

He tried now, to speak, to ask one of his burning questions. But when he opened his mouth, instead of words, the only thing that came out was a yawn.

“You’re tired,” Armando said. “Of course. There’s a spare room you can nap in, and I’ll get some extra blankets since the weather is quite cold at the moment.”

Oliver blinked then. “A nap?”

Armando nodded, then qualified his offer. “You’re not planning on going back out into the storm, are you? Last message from the mayor said we should expect to stay inside for hours.”

For the first time, Oliver’s thoughts turned to his parents. If they’d heeded the mayor’s instruction to return home, what would have happened when they discovered only one of their sons had

made it back from school? He had no idea for how long he'd been knocked out in the trash can, nor how many hours had passed while he was being batted around inside it. Would they be worried about him?

Then Oliver shook his worry away. His parents probably hadn't even noticed. Why should he give up the opportunity to rest in an actual bed, especially when the only thing waiting for him at home was a dingy alcove?

He looked up at Armando.

"That sounds really nice," he said, finally managing a full sentence. "Thank you." He paused then, deliberating over his words. "I have so many questions to ask you."

"I'll still be here when you wake," the old inventor said, smiling kindly. "Once you're warm, fed, and rested, then we can talk about everything."

There was a knowing look in his eye. For some reason, Oliver wondered if Armando knew something about him, about his freakish powers, his visions and what they meant. But Oliver quickly pushed those thoughts away. Of course he didn't. There was nothing magical about Armando. He was just an old inventor in a strange factory, not a magician or wizard or anything like that.

Suddenly overcome with fatigue, Oliver had nothing left in him to even ponder. The storm, the days of stress from the move and starting a new school, the lack of sufficient food, it was all suddenly too much for him to handle.

“Okay,” he conceded. “But it’ll just be a quick nap.”

“Of course,” Armando replied.

Oliver stood, rubbing his weary eyes. Armando used his walking stick to help lift his frail body to standing.

“Along here,” Armando said, gesturing down the narrow, dimly lit corridor.

Oliver let Armando lead the way, trudging wearily along behind him. His body felt very heavy now, as though he’d been holding in so much stress and unhappiness and was only now aware.

At the end of the corridor stood an odd wooden door that was lower than a normal door and curved at the top like it belonged in a chapel. There was even a little window in it, framed with burnished iron.

Armando opened the door and ushered Oliver inside. Oliver felt a sense of nervous anticipation as he stepped over the threshold.

The room was bigger than he’d been expecting, and much neater considering the state of the kitchen. There was a large bed covered in a soft, white duvet and matching pillows, with an extra woolen blanket folded at the end of it. There was a wooden desk covered in small war figurines, beneath a window with long blue curtains. In one corner of the room was a fabric-covered chair, next to a bookshelf crammed with exciting-looking adventure stories.

It looked, in every way, like the kind of bedroom an eleven-

year-old boy like Oliver ought to have, rather than an alcove in the cold, shadowy corner of an unfurnished living room. He felt a sudden surge of grief for his life. But stronger than that was the gratitude he felt for this sudden opportunity to escape it all, even if it was only for a few hours.

Oliver looked over his shoulder at Armando. “This is a very nice room,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t mind me staying in here?”

He became very aware then of his sodden clothes and the muck he must have trailed into Armando’s factory. But rather than chastise or berate him—like his parents had yesterday with his soggy sweater—Armando just smiled a knowing smile.

“I hope you sleep well and feel rested when you wake,” he said. Then he turned and left the room.

Oliver stood for only one more awestruck moment before realizing he was far too exhausted to even stand up. He wanted to think about the strange events of the day, to try and make sense of them, to replay them and order them and catalogue them in his mind. But there was only one thing his body demanded right now and that was sleep.

So he peeled off his clothes, put on a pair of too big pajamas he found hanging in the closet, and crawled into bed. The mattress was comfortable. The duvet was warm and smelled of fresh lavender.

As Oliver snuggled into the big, warm bed, he felt safer than he ever had before in his life. Finally, he felt like he was somewhere

he belonged.

CHAPTER SIX

The world was very quiet. Bright sunlight warmed Oliver's eyelids. He let them flicker open. There was a shard of light coming through a gap in the curtains.

Oliver suddenly remembered where he was. He sat up, blinking, taking in the sight of the bedroom in Armando's factory. It was all real. He really was here.

It suddenly occurred to him that it was morning. His nap had turned into a deep sleep that had lasted all through the night and into the next day. He shouldn't be surprised; the bed was the warmest, most comfortable bed he'd ever slept in. In fact, Armando's factory felt more like home to Oliver than any of his previous houses ever had. He snuggled under the duvet, feeling content and completely in love with the place. He never wanted to leave.

But what of his family? Oliver wondered with a growing sense of anguish. By now they must have noticed that he was missing. He hadn't come home for an entire night. Maybe they thought he'd been swept away by the storm. They must be worried.

Though the thought concerned Oliver, there was another side to the coin. If they *did* think he'd been swept away by the storm, that meant he may never have to go home at all...

Oliver grappled with his thoughts, caught somewhere between anguish at causing them any distress and excitement at the

opportunity fate had apparently presented him. He decided, finally, that he'd address the issue with Armando.

Feeling rejuvenated from his sleep, Oliver leapt up and hurried out of the room to find Armando. He rushed through the rabbit warren of corridors, trying to find his way back to the main factory floor where he suspected Armando would be. But the place was a maze. Doors he'd been certain were there yesterday now seemed not to be. It was only when he found the kitchen and Horatio the dozing bloodhound in his basket that he was able to work out where he was and which direction he needed to go.

Finally, he emerged out onto the factory floor. In bright daylight it was even more magnificent than it had been in the dim, stormy light. Now he could see all the way up to the ceiling—which was as high as a cathedral's—and see that upon the wooden joists perched several mechanical birds. Others fluttered about in the rafters, moving in every manner like real birds, except for the fact their wings were made of brass and their eyes of little lights that glowed red. He noticed bats as well, sleeping upside down with their huge metal wings folded across their chests.

“How on earth...?” Oliver muttered aloud, gazing up at the myriad of flying machines above his head.

“Ah, Oliver, good morning,” came Armando's voice.

Oliver's gaze snapped back down to the factory floor. There was Armando, straightening up from where he'd been bent over a machine, tinkering away. Immediately, Oliver lost all courage

to ask him whether he could stay on at the factory.

“Did you sleep well?” the old inventor asked.

“I did,” Oliver said. “In fact, better than ever. But it was only supposed to be a nap. Why didn’t you wake me after the storm finished?”

Armando chuckled. “I tried, dear boy, but you were in a deep, deep slumber. My guess is you really needed that sleep.” He smiled. “Now, I promised to tell you all about my factory and my life as an inventor, didn’t I? Would you like some breakfast first? A shower? A clean change of clothes?”

It was only then that Oliver realized he was still wearing pajamas. He hesitated, mulling Armando’s offer over in his mind. Breakfast and a warm shower and clean clothes were not things his parents would offer him if he returned home. It wouldn’t hurt to stay a little longer, he persuaded himself. At least to go on Armando’s tour.

“If it’s your family you’re concerned about, perhaps you ought to call them?” the old inventor added, picking up on his hesitation.

That was the last thing Oliver wanted to do. He just shook his head. “That’s okay. I can go on the tour first.”

The old inventor reached forward and placed a firm but reassuring hand on Oliver’s shoulder. He peered down at him with his misty eyes. Oliver could see the deep kindness and warmth within them. They were trustworthy, imploring him to relax. Not for the first time since arriving at the factory, Oliver

got the sense that Armando knew more than he was letting on.

The old man gestured with his arm to the factory floor.

“Please, this way,” he said.

Thoughts of his family shifted to the back of Oliver’s mind as curiosity took over. He walked slowly alongside Armando, matching his pace.

“I was a similar age to you, Oliver,” Armando began, “when I started to make my own inventions. Nothing that worked, mind you.” He chuckled. “I think I managed a mechanical slingshot but that was about it.”

Oliver remember the slingshot he’d created and used on Chris. The coincidence struck him, and the sense of it lingered, mixing with all the other emotions coursing through him.

“I excelled at school,” Armando continued. “Although I didn’t get along very well with any of the children.”

“You and me both,” Oliver added.

They reached a room and Armando strolled inside. It was a library, Oliver saw, with high ceilings and wooden floorboards. A spiral staircase led to a second level where there was a comfy-looking floral armchair and a large reading lamp.

Armando took a book from the shelf beside him. It was a leather-bound tome with the title embossed in gold: *Odontodactylus scyllarus*.

“I read voraciously,” Armando said. “I wanted to learn about all the laws of physics, about the history of aviation. Everything. I was what you would call a *nerd*.”

Oliver just nodded. Armando's story was so similar to his own, it was comforting. He watched Armando wistfully place the book back on the shelf. Then he wandered slowly out of the room. Oliver followed, curiosity driving him on.

"I left school with good grades and went to college," Armando continued as he walked. "That's when things really started to pick up for me. I had access for the first time to materials and tools, to workshops, and of course some brilliant mentors. Some of the best minds."

Suddenly, a swooping mechanical pheasant flew overhead, making Oliver gasp and duck. Its underbelly skimmed Oliver's head, and Oliver saw it was the same rainbow color as an oil spill. Armando himself didn't seem too surprised by the intrusion. He kept talking. Oliver straightened up and brushed himself down.

"There was an enthusiasm then for innovation," Armando was saying. "And the war afforded me a real opportunity. They were willing to take risks on bright minds like mine. I started off inventing things for the war effort, you see."

He gestured into a room. Oliver saw it was the one with the military tank inside. It had a myriad of bizarre weapons protruding from the front. In the brighter light, Oliver could also see now that there were all kinds of different types of tracks and tires lining the room, some made of rubber, others of metal, others still with sharp spikes upon them.

"They gave me this factory," Armando said, moving on. "And people to work alongside me."

“Really?” Oliver asked, a little taken aback. His book had made no real mention of Armando actually having a running factory. He’d been painted as a loon, someone who got caught up in flights of fantasy rather than someone who was trusted to run a factory, and indeed someone who’d been somewhat successful at it.

Armando nodded. “I know. It seems strange to think it now. Now that everything here has become so... quiet.”

He seemed lost for a second in his reverie. But then he snapped back to the moment again and led Oliver slowly onward.

They entered a room filled with glass beakers and bubbling liquids, with little Bunsen burners in a row and large machines making chugging noises. The room was hot and smelled of strange chemicals. Oliver wrinkled his nose at the stench.

“You may have heard the rumors,” Armando said, “that nothing I invented ever worked.”

Oliver felt bad for the old man and blushed on his behalf. “Yes, I did hear that.”

Armando nodded sadly. “They took my team away. Sent them elsewhere, to places they’d be more useful. They closed the factory. Officially anyway. I continued to work here secretly.”

The secret wall! Of course. No wonder this wing of the factory was so odd and hidden away behind the mechanical wall. Armando had had to conceal himself, to keep his work undetected in order to keep going.

“So you’ve been alone here ever since?” Oliver asked.

“Unfunded would be a better word,” Armando said. He sighed, as if there was some kind of heavy weight pressing on him, and tapped his skull with a bony finger. “I have so much knowledge in here and no one to pass it on to. No son or daughter. No apprentice.”

They drew up slowly to a machine. It was just like the large bowl-shaped invention Oliver had first seen in the main factory. But while that one was covered in dust and falling into disrepair, this one looked brand new.

Oliver touched the brass mechanism with his fingertips.

“I call that a Bird’s Eye View,” Armando said.

“What does it do?” Oliver asked.

“It allows you to look down from above at certain locations. It was supposed to help with reconnaissance during the war effort.”

Oliver frowned. “But how does it work? You’d need cameras in the sky. And what’s the bowl for? And this spinny bit? I don’t understand.”

He mulled it over. Perhaps it was something to do with electromagnetic currents passing through the raindrops in clouds, causing some kind of image in much the same way as an ultrasound, or how blind bats use sonar to see. But even that was too out there for Oliver to accept. Really, the only way something like that could ever work was through some kind of undiscovered physical force. Some kind of magic.

Armando let out a morose smile. “It never did work. There was always a missing ingredient. With every single one of my big

inventions, there was always just one thing missing.”

Oliver wondered what Armando meant by that. What could the missing ingredient he was alluding to be?

He realized then that Armando had carried on ahead. Oliver rushed to catch up.

“So you’ve been making inventions for seventy years?” he asked.

“And counting,” Armando replied.

“They didn’t send you to fight after they shut down the factory?”

Armando made a little face of distaste. “I was supposed to be drafted like everyone else. But the government wanted me to try to finish my grand invention. One that would be incredibly useful to the war effort. They gave me one last chance to make it work.”

“What was it?” Oliver asked. He remembered the pages of his inventors book. They’d mentioned that Armando was working on a time machine before the war had stalled his efforts. Was that what he meant?

Armando shook his head. “It never worked, so it doesn’t matter.”

He seemed even more morose. Oliver felt bad for bringing up a past failure that he was clearly still touchy about.

“Never say never,” he said in an attempt to bring the inventor back to his normal happy level. “Perhaps tomorrow will be the day you find the missing piece.”

But rather than cheering him, Oliver’s words seemed to make

Armando even more sad. He sat slowly, his joints creaking.

“I’m running out of time, Oliver,” he said. “My days are numbered.”

Oliver got the distinct impression that he wasn’t just referring to his old age, but to something more specific, something on the horizon, perhaps something he’d even had a premonition of.

Armando sighed wearily. He seemed to have completely run out of enthusiasm. With a sad voice, he said, “I suppose that concludes the tour.”

Oliver snapped to attention. He felt himself deflate. It couldn’t be over. He didn’t want this moment with his hero to draw to a close. He wanted to stay here forever, to never leave. But even as Armando stood and headed to the door, beckoning him to follow, Oliver just couldn’t summon the courage to ask. He was tongue-tied all over again.

Silently, his throat thick from cowardice, Oliver followed Armando back into the long corridor. At one end was the door to the bedroom he’d slept in last night. It had felt like *his* room, like he was always supposed to have been there. But they turned the opposite direction, away from that cozy room of comfort, heading for the main factory floor.

When they reached the main part of the factory, Oliver glanced about him with a sense of yearning. The sight of all the machines and the rafters filled with mechanical bats and birds still stunned him. To think of all these amazing machines Armando had created awed him. Bitterly, Oliver realized that

he'd never get a chance to work on them together with his hero.

"It's been quite delightful meeting you, Oliver," Armando said then, offering his hand for Oliver to shake.

He was as polite as ever, but Oliver still sensed the melancholy in his voice. He shook the old inventor's hand, willing himself to broach the topic of him staying but failing to even find the words.

"Yes," was all he managed. "It's been truly wonderful."

Then he turned away from Armando and headed for the rotating wall. He dragged his feet as he walked, and thought sadly about the life he was returning to, with the horrible alcove and his bully of a brother.

He reached the wall and began to search for the lever. That was when he saw a small table with some mail and this morning's newspaper upon it. Oliver saw the sad faces of Mom, Dad, and Chris. He gasped. What were they doing in the paper? He caught a glimpse of the title: *Missing Storm Boy. Parents Appeal.*

His heart hitched. So they really were worried about him? His feelings of guilt returned tenfold.

He grabbed the paper and unfolded it. It was then that Oliver saw there was more to the headline. Now that it was all visible, the headline read in its entirety: *Missing Storm Boy. Parents Appeal for Financial Support to Aid in Search.*

His heart sank. *Of course*, he thought bitterly. His parents weren't actually concerned about him. In the short time he'd been missing, they'd already found a way to milk the situation for sympathy and money. When he returned home they'd probably

be annoyed at him for ruining their moment in the limelight, and for putting an end to whatever money the generous public were being duped into giving them.

He hesitated at the wall, his hand on the lever. On the other side was the world he knew, a world of bullying and torment, of despair and untapped potential. But on this side, on Armando's side, there was so much more. His dreams could be realized here. And Armando's factory felt more like home to Oliver than any of his myriad homes before it had. Here he had a room, he had wisdom and a chance to learn. He'd be mad to walk away from it. He couldn't help but feel like he was supposed to be here. There was nothing for him on the other side, nothing at all. This was where he belonged.

A bolt of courage struck him like lightning. Slowly, Oliver withdrew his hand from the lever. He turned and took a step forward, looking squarely at the figure of Armando on the opposite side of the factory floor. His throat was still thick and sticky, as if it didn't want him to utter the words he was about to, but somehow he found the strength to project his voice across the factory floor and utter aloud the words he so desperately wanted to.

“Let me stay and help you. If you let me stay, I could bring a fresh, new perspective.”

He bit his lip and watched Armando pause from the other side of the factory.

“Stay?” Armando called back.

Oliver shifted uncomfortably. “I mean work here. With you.” He chewed his lip with apprehension. Admitting this felt very forward and it was taking all the guts he could muster. He hurried forward, closing the gap between them. “I’m good with inventions and I could really help. I know I could.”

One of Armando’s eyebrows rose. “You mean stay long term? But what about your own life, Oliver?”

“My own life is horrible,” Oliver said without missing a beat. “My brother is a bully. I sleep in an alcove. I feel like... like this is where I’m supposed to be. Does that make sense?”

Armando smiled gently. He seemed hesitant. “I’m too old to care for you...”

“You’ve already cared for me more than my mom and dad do,” Oliver said, accepting that he’d have to be even more independent and self-reliant if he stayed here than he was at home.

“And you’re supposed to go to school...”

“I already know everything they’re teaching me! I’m the smartest kid there. Besides, I could learn from you. You could mentor me, and teach me how to make your machines. I could be your apprentice.”

Armando seemed anguished, Oliver thought, like he was grappling with a dilemma. He didn’t want to be an imposition and overstep the boundary, but this was the first time in his life things had felt close to being right. He couldn’t walk away now and leave all this behind.

“I’ll do anything,” Oliver begged him. “Please. Let me prove

myself to you at least. Show you what I can do.”

Armando paused. A long silence passed before he spoke again.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to see what you’re made of,” he said finally.

Oliver raised his eyebrows. It wasn’t a yes, but it wasn’t a no either. “Really? You’ll let me work on something? Show you what I can do?”

“I will,” Armando replied, his expression unreadable. “But first you must do one thing.”

“Of course,” Oliver said. “Anything.”

Armando smirked with good nature. “Please put on some actual clothes.”

Oliver looked down at his pajamas and blushed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oliver's mind spun as he hurriedly showered. Armando hadn't said he could stay or be an apprentice, but he was giving him some kind of opportunity and that kept the flame of hope burning inside of him. He couldn't help but feel like he was going to be put to some kind of test. Not that Armando had said as such; in fact, he'd not said much about it at all. But Oliver was desperate to prove himself and show Armando that he belonged here.

He went to the closet and found that it was full of multiple sets of workman's overalls. Though they were clean and well made, they looked very old-fashioned. He picked out a pair of dark blue overalls and slipped them on. Of course they were far too big for him, so he rolled up the pant legs. Then he looked in the mirror and marveled at his appearance. It looked like he'd stepped out of the 1940s!

As soon as he was ready, he ran back out to the factory floor, eager for his first lesson from Armando.

"I'm here," he said, wide-eyed, as he skidded up to the old man.

Armando nodded at his appearance, clearly approving the fact that he was no longer wandering around in pajamas.

"I see you've found my old workers' closet," he said. "These clothes were left over from the war effort. People worked here

and slept here around the clock back then.”

“Do you mind me wearing them?” Oliver asked, suddenly worried.

“Not at all. It’s nice to see them being put to some use after all these years.” Armando looked away into the distance as if reminiscing on better times. “Now. You were wanting to demonstrate your abilities to me, if I recall.”

Oliver nodded, though he was filled with apprehension. He chewed his lip and began to follow Armando past a row of workbenches. As they went, Oliver noticed that one was covered with different fabrics and a pile of wires. He knew right away that he was looking at all the theoretically necessary components to create an invisibility coat. He craned his neck as they passed, then turned, wide-eyed with surprise, to face Armando.

“Are you making an invisibility coat?” he asked.

“Not anymore,” Armando replied, dismissively. “No one’s ever cracked it and I’ve not been able to either.”

“I’ve been trying myself,” Oliver confessed.

“Well, if you want my advice, best not waste any more time on it,” Armando replied. “I gave up years ago.”

Oliver couldn’t help but feel disappointed. The thought of cracking the invisibility coat was one of the things that excited him the most about inventing. But if Armando didn’t want him working on it, there was nothing he could do. He’d have to let that particular dream go.

Oliver continued following Armando through the winding

corridors of the factory. He soon recognized that they had entered the corridor with the room that contained the big military tank. To Oliver's surprise, this was the room they headed straight into.

"You don't want me to make a weapon, do you?" Oliver asked, staring up at the huge tank with wide eyes as they drew closer.

"Goodness, no," Armando said. "I want to see if you can make the periscope inside digital."

"Oh," Oliver said, not entirely certain that that was any better.

The only successful periscopes he'd ever made had been done using the good old-fashioned technique of a pair of telescopes and precisely angled mirrors. But he knew that the Navy had invented televised periscopes all the way back in the 1960s, and then the more modern photonic masts, which used cameras and infrared. So it *was* possible. And Oliver was determined not to fail. Armando hadn't said this was a test, or even that he could stay on at the factory based on the outcome of the task, but Oliver felt personally as if his entire future was resting on its success. There'd be next to no chance of him convincing Armando to take him under his wing if he couldn't even prove himself on this one little task.

He spent a long time pondering, looking at the current periscope set-up, which was indeed the same old crude version he'd made himself before. When he'd finally worked out a possible solution in his mind, he decided what specific materials he'd need to achieve such a feat.

“Do you have a spare cathode ray tube?” Oliver asked, considering that the first step would be to create a working screen like a television.

“Of course,” Armando said. “I have something of everything somewhere.”

“In which case, I will also need a camera. And a whole load of wire. A motherboard and solder. Oh, and a battery pack or similar type of power source.”

Oliver wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a little upward twitch at the corner of Armando's mouth. Perhaps the old inventor was starting to wonder whether Oliver might be apprentice material after all. Still, Oliver wasn't going to start getting overconfident. He still had to make the thing.

“Be my guest,” Armando said, gesturing behind him to the rest of the factory. “You're welcome to help yourself. I have some things to be getting on with. Fetch me when you're done.”

It dawned on Oliver then that he was going to have to find everything he needed on his own.

He watched Armando shuffle out of the room. Now alone, Oliver set about drawing a diagram of what he was hoping to achieve. He drew a simple mast with a camera mounted at the top and wires running through a plastic tube that came out the other end and attached to the display screen. It was simple, theoretically, but far beyond anything Oliver had ever designed or constructed before.

Once he had worked out what his invention needed to look

like, Oliver set about searching for the items he'd need to build it. He wandered through the factory, scouring the aisles for materials, shocked by the strange array of items available. Armando had not been joking when he'd said he had something of everything in the factory. There were all kinds of bits of junk, like large bendy tubes, colorful springs that looked like they'd been removed from a magician's box of tricks, wood, tires, and coils of wire.

Oliver took a long time sorting through the items to find what he really needed. Then once he'd collected all the necessary bits and bobs, he headed back to the workbench, arms laden.

He worked quickly, trying to block out the stress he felt. Now was not the time to get intimidated or crumble under pressure. But he was sure that if he failed to demonstrate his ability now, Armando would give up on him for sure. He really needed to prove himself or he'd be heading straight back home to his alcove and bully of a brother and constantly empty stomach. Too much was riding on his success for him to freeze up now.

Oliver put on some protective goggles and fired up the soldering iron. He was thrilled to be using a tool his school deemed him too young to work with. He attached all the wires in the correct place on the baseboard, copying from memory a diagram he'd looked at a million times in his inventor's book. He delighted in the smell of melting solder, in the feel of accomplishment as he hooked up the device to its power source.

Unaware of just how much time had passed on this particular

task, Oliver put the final pieces in place and then stepped back to admire his handiwork. He had to admit, it really didn't look as impressive in the flesh as it had in his mind or his diagram. The piece of drain pipe he'd used as a mast to connect the camera to the screen was wonky. The television itself was ancient, clearly salvaged from a junkyard, and it had a strangely convex screen. The tube was cumbersome and quite an eyesore in its position behind it. But it was the best he could do.

He went and fetched Armando, bringing him back to the room. Armando didn't look too impressed by what he saw. He seemed to be regarding the contraption with an air of disappointment.

"You're done?" he asked.

Once again, Oliver felt the enormity of this task pressing down upon him. Had he really done everything he could? Was this the absolute best of his ability? He suddenly felt extremely insecure in his creation. Not to mention terrified that if it didn't work it would prove once and for all that Oliver wasn't talented enough to be Armando's apprentice. Then he'd be sent back to his terrible life for sure. The thought was unbearable.

"It's ready," Oliver said with a nod, his chest tight with anguish.

He flicked on the machine and heard the buzz of electricity as it came to life. He let out a little bit of held breath. So far so good.

The LD light on the end of the camera blinked red. So that was working too, Oliver thought with a growing sense of relief

and accomplishment.

Then he and Armando walked over to the screen. To Oliver's utter dismay, they were staring at nothing but blackness. The image from the camera wasn't being displayed onto the screen, which was the whole point of the task. If he couldn't make the image come onto the screen, he'd effectively achieved nothing.

Beside him, he could feel the disappointment coming off Armando. But it didn't even begin to match the disappointment Oliver felt in himself. He'd let himself down. He'd been a fool to ever think he could be more than a poor kid from a bad neighborhood.

Oliver couldn't even bear to hear what Armando was about to say. He didn't need it confirmed to him, he already knew. He turned and headed for the door, trudging dejectedly away from his failure.

"Oliver..." Armando said.

Oliver couldn't even bear to look back. "No, no, you don't have to say it. I'll just leave."

"Oliver..." Armando repeated.

"It's fine. I understand. I'm leaving."

"OLIVER!" Armando yelled, interrupting him.

This time, Oliver finally stopped. He'd made it all the way to the door, and he turned now at the threshold, looking back through sad eyes at Armando, who was still standing beside his crude invention.

"Yes?" he said, sadly, bracing himself for Armando's

disappointment.

“I think you missed something,” Armando said.

Oliver frowned. It was not what he'd been expecting to hear. “What?”

Armando just nodded at the invention. “Come and look. You'll figure it out once you get here.”

His brow furrowing even more, Oliver walked back over to his ugly machine. He didn't really want to look at it again, at his failure. What good would it do, other than rub salt in the wound?

But as he approached, he noticed the same thing Armando had. There was something wrong with the camera he had connected to the screen. Though it was on and working, as indicated by the flashing light, the actual lens didn't look right at all. In fact, it looked as though it had been coated in a film of something black, like oil or dust.

Oliver hurried over and used the sleeve of his overalls to wipe the lens. The thick, black muck started to come off onto his sleeve, and Oliver saw as he cleaned it that a blurred image was starting to appear on the screen.

He couldn't believe it. The machine had worked all along! It had just been the dirty lens obscuring the image, projecting back nothing but its blackened surface.

“I did it,” Oliver muttered, too stunned to really believe it.

He kept wiping the lens, amazed to see more of the picture appear. It grew ever clearer the more he removed the dirt. With the irrefutable evidence emerging before his eyes, it began to

dawn on Oliver that the invention was a success. That he'd done it.

He looked over at Armando. The old inventor looked thrilled. Hope made Oliver suddenly buoyant. He felt tears begin to well in his eyes.

"Does that mean..." he began, his voice thick with emotion, "that I can stay?"

"Yes," Armando confirmed with a nod. "You can stay." Then he added, with stern emphasis, "*For now.*"

The qualifier did nothing to quell Oliver's excitement. He just couldn't contain himself. He leapt up and down on the spot, punching the air, whooping and hollering.

"I did it!" he cried, running in triumphant circuits around the room. "I did it!"

Armando chuckled but kept a more tempered response. "I feel with your determination and thoroughness, not to mention the enormity of your brain power, well, I'd be foolish to send you away rather than nurture your talents."

Oliver stopped running, halting in front of the inventor and gazing up at his hero. He was so overwhelmed with gratitude, he wanted to throw his arms around the old man. But he held back. It didn't seem appropriate.

"What now?" he asked, overjoyed that he'd really done it, that he'd proven himself. "What do you want me to work on next? How about the invisibility coat?"

Oliver's fear had given way to excitement. All he wanted to

do now was get going. But Armando shook his head with good humor.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, my boy. I need to see how you get along first. With actual inventions, rather than theoretically possible but practically impossible ones. We must start with the basics.”

“Whatever you want,” Oliver said. “I’m ready to learn. Let’s start right now.”

Armando smiled kindly. “Of course. Come with me. We will work on more things and see how you get along. Then we can discuss what to do with you on a more long-term basis.”

Oliver felt like he was walking on air as he followed Armando to a corner of the factory. Here, there was a workbench set up with a whole array of tools—saws, clamps, and files—and a range of materials—wood, metal, and plastic. Oliver gingerly touched his fingers against them, delighted by the prospect of soon using them.

“Let’s go through the basics,” Armando began, indicating a pair of plastic goggles. “Safety first.”

Oliver put the goggles on.

“These are special ones, by the way,” Armando said. “Modified by myself for improved functionality.”

He reached and clicked a little button on the bridge of the glasses. Oliver gasped as the world turned black and white.

“The black and white function is for improved contrasting,” Armando explained. Then he clicked the button again and

Oliver's world turned green. "Infrared for night work."

"Will there be a lot of that?" Oliver asked. "Night work?"

He didn't mind if there was. In fact, the prospect was quite exciting. The idea of working until midnight seemed quite romantic to Oliver.

Armando was nothing more than a heat-sensored red blob as he answered. "I'll try to keep it to a minimum." He clicked the button and reappeared in front of Oliver's eyes once again as the old man he'd become quite familiar with. "But there may be times when we must, times when you will be expected to forgo sleep."

"I'll do anything," Oliver replied stoically. And he really meant it. He wanted nothing more in the world than to help Armando. To be his apprentice. To have the old man as a mentor.

But Armando's troubled expression seemed to suggest he had other things on his mind. "I'm most certain you will." Then he snapped back to attention. "Come, come, let's get to work."

The rest of the day for Oliver was a dreamlike blur. Armando showed him all the basics of carpentry and electronics. They started by making simple paper circuits with copper tape, coin batteries and LEDs, then moved on to building a small electric motor with a battery, wire, and magnets.

"We'll look at the chemicals another time," Armando explained as the exciting day drew to a close.

Oliver's head felt very full, but he absorbed everything like a sponge, eager only to know more and more and more, eager, too,

to prove himself to Armando so that the elderly inventor trusted him enough to take him on full time as an apprentice.

As night fell on Oliver's second day in the factory, Armando announced, "Let's stop for dinner."

Oliver removed his goggles and smoothed down his flyaway hairs, wiping away others that had gotten stuck with sweat to his forehead. It had been hard work but he wouldn't have it any other way.

As they began to walk together toward the kitchen, Oliver heard a sudden noise from the other end of the factory. He flinched in shock, and heard the thin growl of Horatio the bloodhound in the distance.

"Someone's here," he exclaimed, turning back to Armando with an expression of panic.

"Yes," the old inventor confirmed. "That'll be Lucas, the factory foreman."

Oliver paused, shocked and surprised. "You mean to say, someone else works in the factory?"

He felt a strange swell of jealousy in his chest. He thought he'd be the only one working here. The thought of sharing his hero with another left a bad taste in his mouth.

"I've been meaning to tell you," Armando added, somewhat flippantly. "Lucas has been at my side since day one. He's the only person who has stuck with me through thick and thin. When I'm not around, you'll be working alongside him. He'll be showing you what needs to be done."

“When you’re not around?” Oliver repeated, feeling an anxious shard lodge in his throat. Sharing his hero with someone else was one thing but having his hero not available was something else entirely! “What do you mean? Where else would you be if not here?”

Before Armando had a chance to reply, an approaching figure drew up beside them. Lucas too was an old man, though clearly not as old as Armando. Oliver estimated him to be in his eighties. If he had indeed been foreman of the factory for the last seventy years, he must have been around Oliver’s age when he started working there! That thought bothered Oliver even more.

Lucas’s lined face seemed stuck in a permanent frown, his features dragged downward from gravity, making him look as unhappy as Horatio the bloodhound. He eyed Oliver suspiciously.

“Lucas,” Armando said brightly. “This is Oliver.”

Lucas’s expression could only be described as cold. His eyes were very pale and very blue, and they seemed to penetrate right into Oliver’s soul. Clearly, Lucas didn’t like the idea of sharing the old inventor with anyone either.

“He’s working here, is he?” Lucas said, his voice dripping with disgust.

“Yes,” Armando replied cheerfully, clearly not picking up on the hatred in Lucas’s voice. “For the time being anyway. Tomorrow morning, I’ll need you to show him the ropes and get him up to speed. I have some important business to attend to and will be out all day.”

Oliver tore his gaze from Lucas to Armando, feeling suddenly panicked. This wasn't what he'd imagined at all. He'd thought Armando would be teaching him, not this horrible scowling man who clearly hated him!

"Come, come," Armando said. "Dinner, then bed."

"Wait..." Oliver said, about to protest about the arrangements for the next day.

But Armando seemed suddenly very distracted. It was as though his focus had shifted instantly from Oliver to something else entirely.

Oliver looked over at Luas, at the intruder into his otherwise perfect life. Lucas locked eyes with Oliver. Slowly, a menacing grin spread across his face. Oliver gulped.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning Oliver readied himself for the day, wearing a clean pair of the 1940s workman's overalls. He left his room and went to the factory floor, where Lucas was already waiting for him. There was no sign of Armando. Oliver gulped with trepidation.

Lucas glowered. He didn't even bother with a hello.

"I've been told to look after you today," was all he said, and his tone implied it was the last thing he wanted to do in the world.

Oliver shrugged and stuffed his hands into his deep pockets. He felt very uncomfortable in Lucas's presence.

Just then, a noise came from behind. Oliver looked over his shoulder and saw Armando, walking stick in hand, hobbling across the factory. He was wearing a long green trench coat and heading for the fake wall. Oliver wondered where he was going.

"Armando?" Oliver called out. The thought of being left in the factory with just Lucas made him feel quite panicked.

When the old inventor didn't respond, Oliver went to approach him instead. But before he had a chance to even make a step toward Armando, he felt a strong hand suddenly clamp down on his shoulder. He turned, surprised, to see Lucas's sour face glaring down at him. For an eighty-something man, he had a very strong grip.

"Don't interfere," Lucas hissed.

Oliver had already worked out that Lucas wasn't fond of him, but the hatred in his face was unmistakable. Oliver couldn't even begin to fathom why Lucas hated him so much.

"But where is he going?" Oliver asked.

"It's none of your business," Lucas barked back. His eyes narrowed even further, until they were nothing but slits. His thin lips twitched, as though reveling in the fact that he held more information than Oliver.

The fake factory wall squealed then. Oliver looked over to see that Armando was now gone.

Lucas released his grip on Oliver's shoulder. He seemed to soften a little, Oliver thought. Some of the tenseness in his stance released.

"Let me show you around a bit more," he said. "I bet Armando didn't do a particularly thorough tour of the factory."

Oliver couldn't help but feel suspicious of the invitation. From everything he'd experienced of Lucas so far, he wouldn't put it past him to have some kind of ulterior motive. Perhaps he had some evil plan to get rid of him. Maybe he'd lock Oliver inside the mechanized tank, or set a flock of mechanical birds on him!

"Uh... okay," Oliver said with a wobbly voice.

He didn't want Lucas to know how afraid he felt, so he kept his chin high as he followed the old man away from the workbench.

He was led, first, to a new corridor he hadn't yet seen. Inside was a large red spiral staircase.

"Up there is my office and my room for when I do nights,"

Lucas told him. “Off limits for you, of course.”

“Of course,” Oliver repeated dryly.

They went to another corridor, yet another Oliver had not been shown before. It shocked him how many there were in the factory and how easy it was to get lost inside.

“Down here we have all the plastics works,” Lucas explained, as he walked slowly along. He pointed into one room where there was an enormous molding machine and conveyor belt. “You can make anything you want in there. Just program the computer, add the raw ingredients, and let the machines do the rest.”

Oliver’s eyes widened with excitement. “Will I get to work in here?”

Lucas gave a noncommittal shrug. “Maybe one day. But I have an assignment lined up for you today and it doesn’t involve molding.”

Oliver was a little disappointed to not be able to use the cool machine, but he was sure his real assignment would be just as exciting.

In the next room, there was an even more sophisticated-looking machine. It was a 3D printer, Oliver realized.

“We use this for more intricate plastics,” Lucas said. “All the fiddly bits.”

Oliver’s eyes widened even more when he saw the 3D printer. He’d always wanted to try one out. “Will *this* be part of my assignment?” he asked.

Lucas shook his head. “The designs are far too advanced for

you.”

Oliver pouted. He didn't like being talked down to, especially when Lucas knew nothing about him or his abilities. Lucas had no idea how smart Oliver was or how quickly he learned things. But again, Oliver didn't protest. He'd seen so many exciting things in the factory that he knew whatever he ended up working on today would be just as awesome.

Lucas took Oliver along still another corridor he'd never noticed before. It was extremely narrow, and Oliver worked out that it must run sandwiched between the one where his own bedroom was located and the one with all the plastics machines. It was so hidden it would be easy to completely miss it, to walk right past without noticing it was there. Indeed, Oliver must have done just that himself.

“Down here we have Armando's room,” Lucas said. “It's off limits, of course.”

“Yes, yes,” Oliver said with a sigh. Lucas sure seemed to enjoy rubbing it in how much he wasn't allowed to know.

He looked at the door curiously, wondering what kind of room the old inventor would have and what kind of secrets he might have hidden inside.

They carried on along the strangely narrow corridor. It was quite claustrophobic and that wasn't helped by the dim lighting. But then suddenly the corridor opened up, both in width and height, and there was just one enormous door ahead of them.

Lucas stopped. Oliver did too. The door was huge and made

of thick steel. Yellow and black stripes had been painted across it and the words NO ENTRY had been spray painted in red. The door looked very secure, its thick steel clearly impenetrable with any kind of cutting machine.

“Armando’s secret invention is kept safe inside here,” Lucas said. Then he turned and looked at Oliver and repeated his favorite mantra. “But it’s off limits to you.”

Oliver noticed the smirk on Lucas’s face and realized this whole “tour” had been a charade, just a way to show Oliver all the things he wasn’t allowed to do and all the places in the factory he didn’t have access to. Lucas was just trying to make it clear that when it came to the pecking order, Oliver was at the bottom.

But his interest had been piqued by Lucas’s choice of words. *Armando’s secret invention*. It sounded very mysterious and Oliver’s curiosity grew.

“Can you tell me what’s inside?” he asked. “Even though I’m not allowed to see it, I’d love to know what Armando is working on.”

Lucas’s frown intensified. “That’s classified information,” he said evasively.

Oliver suddenly realized that Lucas didn’t know either. “It’s off limits to you, too, isn’t it?” he said, hiding his delight that even the arrogant elderly foreman wasn’t quite as important as he liked to pretend.

Lucas’s silence spoke volumes. If being Armando’s foreman for seventy years hadn’t afforded Lucas any particular luxuries,

Oliver could begin to understand the man's resentment toward him. But he didn't have to behave so unpleasantly because of it. Oliver was sure that Armando wasn't keeping things secret to be cruel. There was surely a good reason for it. Still, he desperately wanted to know himself what was going on behind those doors.

"Come on, it's time to start work," Lucas snapped. He seemed to be in an even worse mood now that Oliver had exposed him.

Despite Lucas's rough personality, Oliver was excited to begin work. He hoped his assignment would be something cool. He'd seen so many amazing things in the factory so far, from the chemistry labs to the plastic printers, the astronomy floor and the electrical rooms, that he felt his heart leap with excitement at the thought of finally being able to get started.

"You can help with that," Lucas barked when they reached a workbench.

Oliver looked and saw that upon it were a thousand tiny cogs. His heart sunk.

"But what is it?" he said, frowning. "What am I supposed to do?"

The atmosphere was tense. Oliver could feel Lucas's eyes boring into him. Lucas sighed loudly.

"It's a rack and pinion gear," he said. "We use them to power conveyor belts. And those things"—he jabbed his pointer finger at the minuscule cogs—"need to go in there to make it work."

Oliver felt crushed. His first assignment was to fix what was clearly an insignificant machine, a broken conveyor belt, rather

than invent anything important or interesting. He was just being used for hard labor.

“Why do you need all of them?” he exclaimed, eyeing the tabletop. There were at least a thousand cogs. It would take hours! “Even the most complex of gears don’t need a thousand cogs to run!”

Lucas narrowed his eyes. “You’re not an expert on how rack and pinion gears work,” he said dryly. “This one needs *all* these cogs. So get to work.”

With a huff, Oliver sat on the stool and began his menial task. He couldn’t help but feel that Lucas was wrong. It didn’t make sense to have so many cogs for a gear! But he didn’t want to cause a fuss or go against his instructions. If this was what Armando had told Lucas he needed to do, then Oliver was going to do it. For all he knew, it might just be another test. A test of compliance and endurance.

As he worked, he started drawing diagrams in his mind, of how much more simply the machine could be designed. There were lots of unnecessary components here, so many, in fact, that it would make the machine far less powerful. With every cog came a transfer of energy, and there was a lot being wasted in the current design.

Just then, Lucas stood. “I’m taking a break. Keep going.”

“Sure,” Oliver said absentmindedly. His whole focus was on the machine now.

He started reworking it, following the diagram he was holding

in his mind. He pushed several of the smaller cogs to the side, instead choosing the ones that would provide the largest, most powerful force once cranked. All the smaller cogs were just diminishing the power, using up the energy for no good reason whatsoever. He worked out at least fifty of the cogs were detrimental to the operation of the machine, and at least another hundred were completely pointless. What he was left with was far more manageable, and he worked quickly to connect them into position.

Once he was done, he secured a lever in order to test the mechanism. He cranked it and the cogs began to turn, each moving the next along. Sure enough, his design was perfectly adequate to complete the necessary desired action.

Oliver clapped his hands, satisfied with a job well done. Then he looked about him. He'd finished his task but Lucas wasn't around to give him a new one.

Then he remembered the invisibility coat. Armando had said not to waste time on it but Oliver was wasting time just sitting here doing nothing and he'd prefer to persevere even if he didn't get anywhere. No one achieved anything without trying, after all.

He went over to the workbench, looking at all the amassed fabrics and wires. As he began sorting through them, he heard Lucas's footsteps returning.

"What are you doing?" Lucas exclaimed. "I told you to work on the cogs."

He looked furious. Oliver couldn't help but cower under his

fury.

“I finished it,” he stammered, taken aback by Lucas’s sheer anger.

“There’s no way,” Lucas contested. “You can’t have finished that work yet.”

“I have,” Oliver insisted. He went back to the workbench and showed Lucas what he’d done. He turned the crank to prove that the mechanism worked accurately. “I took a shortcut,” he explained. He pointed at all the leftover cogs. “None of these were needed to make it work.”

Lucas was completely silent. He seemed stunned by what Oliver had achieved. But instead of congratulating Oliver on a doing such a good job so quickly, he looked even more angry.

Oliver wasn’t about to apologize for doing what had been asked of him, or for improving on it. He folded his arms and calmly asked, “What would you like me to work on next?”

Lucas shrugged. “Carry on with the coat if you want. See if I care. You’re wasting your time anyway.”

It occurred to Oliver then that the cogs assignment was supposed to last him all day, that Armando hadn’t left any other work for him to do because this was all he’d expected him to achieve. He felt triumphant. He was clearly better than anyone was expecting. He couldn’t wait for Armando to get back so he could show him his achievements.

“Okay,” Oliver said, holding his chin up high. “If I’m not needed on the floor, I’d like to work on this in my room.” At

least there he'd be able to work on the coat without the scrutiny of Lucas.

"Whatever," Lucas said, shrugging. He didn't even bother looking at Oliver when he spoke.

Oliver grabbed the trunk of materials and headed away from the workbench. As he walked away, Lucas laughed a horrible cackle.

"Good luck, boy. No one's ever solved that. Not even Armando."

Oliver felt his cheeks burn, but he didn't let Lucas's words dissuade him. If he could survive the torment of Chris, he could survive mocking from Lucas!

He stalked away with the box, went to his new room, and put the box upon the desk. Carefully, he looked through each material contained inside. The black matte fabric had not worked, and yet out of all of them it certainly looked like the one that would be most successful. Black, after all, was what happened when something absorbed no light at all.

Suddenly, Oliver was struck by a moment of inspiration. Black absorbed no light, but white was what happened when *all* light was absorbed. Perhaps if he used white instead, it would offer him the least reflection because it was absorbing everything instead!

He rummaged in the box and found some white material. Then he began the painstaking task of sewing a crisscross of wires into one corner of the fabric. As soon as he had a large

enough sample area, he turned on the table lamp beside him and held the fabric under it.

With bitter disappointment, Oliver saw that he hadn't cracked it.

He sat back in the chair and huffed. What was he missing? The wire seemed thin enough, and he was certain the white fabric was the best choice out of everything there.

He searched in the box, pulling out the wire this time and inspecting it under the light. Perhaps there was something not quite right about it after all. The thinness was supposed to be almost imperceptible to the human eye and yet Oliver could more or less see it. Did it need to be thinner? But how? And even if it was, how was he supposed to work with something thinner than his eyes could see?

He wondered then if Armando had any kind of microscopic device or eyeglass he might be able to use. If he wanted to make the wires even thinner, he'd need a microscope to do it. Surely the old inventor had some around. In fact, he could vaguely recall having seen one or two during the tour.

The problem was, Oliver didn't much want to go back onto the factory floor while Lucas was working. He didn't want the gruff old man to notice him taking more items for his futile task. He didn't want to hear, yet again, that he was going to fail.

Then he remembered his class with Ms. Belfry. She's encouraged him to step into the spotlight even though he was afraid of his classmates bullying him. This was no different

really. If he could endure their taunts and cruel whispers, he could handle Lucas.

He took a deep breath and left his room. Out in the corridor, Horatio the bloodhound looked up at him with his sad eyes. Oliver knelt down and patted his head. The dog sighed before falling back to sleep.

Oliver headed out into the factory. Lucas was busy at his workbench. Perhaps Oliver could sneak past him unnoticed.

In the shadows, Oliver scanned the factory floor to see whether there was a microscope anywhere nearby, or whether he could locate the place where Armando stored the tools.

Just then, he noticed a cupboard mounted onto one wall. It was just like the kind found in shop class at school, the ones where they stored all the drills and screwdrivers. That must be it, Oliver thought.

He made a beeline for it. But no sooner had Oliver stepped out of the shadows and begun to walk toward the tool cupboard, than Lucas turned sharply and glared at him. It was like he'd sensed him coming with some kind of sixth sense. Even from this distance, Oliver could see the coldness in his penetrating blue-eyed stare.

"How's it going?" Lucas barked nastily across the factory floor. "Still not solved it? What a surprise. I bet you go mad trying."

Oliver sucked his cheeks in. He was too determined to stop now, no matter how much Lucas attempted to undermine and

discourage him. He went right up to the cupboard and opened it.

To his delight, it was indeed a tool store. Inside there was a myriad of cutting tools; knives, pliers, screwdrivers, scissors, pretty much anything else someone might need. He selected several different scalpels of varying blade width, considering each one in turn. Then he discovered one was so thin, the blade was like a hair. As he pulled it from the cupboard, the blade glittered in the light. Oliver realized it must be made of diamond. Diamond was known to be the best cutting tool in the world. This was definitely the knife for his task!

Overjoyed by his first success, Oliver closed the cupboard doors carefully and began to search for a microscope. He'd definitely seen one during Armando's tour but he couldn't quite recall where it had been. The tour had been scant at best. And he definitely wasn't going to ask Lucas. The bitter old man would probably send him in the wrong direction just for his own amusement.

Oliver retraced his steps through the factory, heading for the place he knew Armando had begun, then following the most logical route he could. There were several rooms that Armando had poked his head into before deciding there was nothing of importance inside, so Oliver ignored those, because he hadn't even looked in them. Then there was the room with the Bird's Eye View invention and another room full of half-finished automatons, but neither contained the microscope.

Oliver stood in the corridor, baffled. The factory had so many

strange corridors and side rooms it was impossible to orient himself.

He began to wander a little aimlessly. Soon, he found himself standing outside the black-and-yellow-striped steel door. He looked at it curiously, and wondered again what might be inside. Probably the most incredible invention ever, Oliver reasoned, letting his imagination go wild. Whatever it was, it was something that only Armando had ever seen. Even Lucas had not been trusted to look inside. Oliver wondered if one day *he* might be allowed inside. Perhaps if he cracked the invisibility coat, Armando would reward him with a peek inside the secret room.

Oliver needed to get back to the task at hand. He turned. To his surprise, Horatio the bloodhound was standing behind him.

“What are you doing here?” Oliver asked, bending down to rub the old dog behind the ears.

Horatio let out a whine. He turned and trotted, in an arthritic kind of way, to the end of the corridor and stopped there. He looked back expectantly, as if waiting for Oliver. Shrugging, Oliver followed the old dog. But before he reached him, Horatio took off in a trot again, disappearing around the corner. Curiously, and with the distinct impression he was being led somewhere, Oliver turned the corner also. And sure enough, Horatio was waiting for him, looking back at him with droopy, sad eyes.

The moment Oliver came into view, Horatio disappeared through an open door. Oliver followed again. When he walked

in the room after Horatio, he was stunned to see that he was in a room filled with microscopes. The dog had led him right where he needed to be!

“Thanks, Horatio!” he cried, wondering both how the dog had known what he was seeking and why it had decided to help him.

In response, the dog let out one of his sad sighs. Then he turned and hobbled away, his claws clacking against the floorboards as he went.

Oliver wasted no time. He inspected each of the microscopes in turn. Some were very large and very powerful; others were smaller and more portable. He chose one that wasn't too heavy, somewhere in the middle of the two extremes, and hurried out, excited to get to work.

Horatio was snoring soundly in his basket as he passed. The poor thing must have tired itself out helping him, for which Oliver was very grateful.

Oliver scurried past him and into his room, heading to his desk. He placed the microscope on its surface and then got straight to work, under the lamp light, using the ultra-thin diamond-bladed knife to slice the wires even thinner. It was an arduous, difficult task, and yet Oliver found it very satisfying to be so absorbed. Besides, it helped that he was absolutely certain this would make all the difference, that the invisibility coat he'd been trying to make for years was so close to actually coming into existence!

Oliver became so focused on his work, he didn't even notice

the smell of food cooking when Lucas stopped for lunch, nor the fading light as sunset arrived. He was only dimly aware of someone poking their head around the door to check on him, and the sound of sizzling from Lucas's frying pan as he cooked their evening meal. But he cared neither for his own growling stomach nor his fatigue as evening fell. And before long, Oliver drifted off to sleep right where he sat.

*

Oliver found himself swimming in a deep ocean. It was very dark, the surface of the water barely visible high above him. Oliver treaded water as he glanced about him, his dark blond hair swishing as he moved his head about. Somehow, despite being underwater, he could breathe perfectly well.

He blinked with confusion. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the ocean, he realized that he was surrounded by sea life. All around him were huge rainbow-shelled shrimp. They were at least four inches long, with bright green bodies and bright orange legs, and they were covered in a multitude of shimmering, multicolored leopard-print spots.

Oliver reached his hand forward and touched one with his fingertips. It darted away, and at the same moment he felt a spark of electricity zap from the end of his finger. Oliver flinched backward, cradling his hand to his chest. Though the spark had caused him no pain, it had caused an echo of a sensation to rise

inside him, something he remembered having felt before. Oliver looked at his hand and realized the feeling was the same power he'd felt when he'd broken the kitchen table. When he'd touched the rainbow-colored shrimp he'd felt the same surge of energy, of power.

He looked up, focusing on the shoal floating all around him. He reached forward again, touching another. This time when he touched the creature he did not flinch at the strange sensation, like a bolt of electricity moving between them. And this time, a piece of information popped into his head as if physical contact with the animal had dragged it from the depths of his mind. It was the name of their species: peacock mantis shrimp. He'd read all about them once on a trip to the library. He could recall with vivid detail the entire chapter of the book he'd read, about their marvelous ability to see parts of the rainbow imperceptible to the human eye, about how they were extensively studied by scientists due to their ability to see circularly polarized light.

Oliver withdrew his hand suddenly and at once the images faded. But the information did not, as if it was now seared into his mind, transferred photographically from the pages into his memory. It occurred to him that this information could be the missing link needed to succeed in creating invisibility.

All at once, Oliver gasped and opened his eyes. It was dawn. He was back in his bedroom, slumped over the desk where he'd fallen asleep while working on the coat.

He felt very strange indeed, with the lingering feeling of

his power still crackling through his veins. He stared at his hand, at the pointer finger that had connected with the shrimp, overwhelmed by the experience of having information implanted into his mind from seemingly nowhere.

His mind repeated what had happened in his dream, trying to understand. It had felt like more than just a dream. The powers that had been conjured during it were still inside his body. He could still feel them. Certain his magic powers had brought him the inspiration to help him solve his quandary, Oliver leapt up.

He paced his room, mulling everything over. *Odontodactylus scyllarus* was the scientific name of the peacock mantis shrimp. He'd read it before, recently though, not just years ago in the library. Oliver clicked his fingers as he suddenly realized where he'd read the name. Armando's study! The book he'd pulled from his shelf had been entitled *Odontodactylus scyllarus*.

Oliver hurried out of the room and down the corridors. Of course, he immediately found that he was lost. He just couldn't remember all the twists and turns of the factory, all the staircases and rooms coming off of rooms. Where had the library been?

He felt like he was just running in circles, when at last he saw Horatio. The snoozy bloodhound seemed to be the only thing that stayed in one place in the whole factory, and once again he worked out where he needed to go in relation to the spot where the dog was dozing.

At last, he found the library. And there was the book *Odontodactylus scyllarus*, sticking out from the shelf from where

Armando had removed then replaced it, like some clue from the universe.

Oliver snatched it up and began reading as quickly as he could. The passage on circular polarization was dense and difficult for even Oliver to fully decipher, but the important thing was that it was all about altering perception. Just like how the eye needed to be deceived into thinking it was looking at nothing in order to achieve invisibility, changing the circular motion of an electromagnetic wave just enough would create the same effect.

He sat back, feeling giddy from the revelation. But his joy was short-lived. Even if he invented electromagnetic-wave-disrupting spectacles, they'd need to be worn by the person viewing the coat in order to work, since the process only worked in the way the eyes processed the information.

Unless... unless there was a way of creating a sort of current that ran along the surface of the coat, one that pulsed out electromagnetic waves that were already circularly polarized!

That was it!

Oliver jumped to his feet, his mind working a mile a minute as he hurried back to his room. Even though he got lost several times on the way it didn't matter because his mind was so busy frantically sorting through the theory, unmuddling the puzzle pieces in his mind.

At last he returned to his desk, snatching up the coat. He'd already been halfway there with his design. He already knew the wires would be needed to create the electromagnetic wave, he'd

just failed to make the link between how disrupting them could trick the eye of the beholder.

Though the final step was theoretically complicated, in practical terms it just involved hooking up two opposing currents. After his periscope test, preparing a motherboard for a simple current was now remarkably simple for Oliver. Then it was just a case of tweaking everything until the currents were in perfect oppositional sync.

As dawn gave way to morning, Oliver finished his task. He sat back and admired his handiwork. With the thinner wire he'd only been able to sew a small square of fabric. But this time he was absolutely certain he'd done it, that he'd solved the mystery of invisibility.

Filled with anticipation, Oliver placed his hand under the lamp. Then he held his breath and very carefully, very slowly, laid the small square of fabric upon it.

Sure enough, before his very eyes, a small square in the middle of his palm disappeared from sight.

Oliver yelped and drew back. It was an instinctive reaction to a bizarre experience. His mind couldn't comprehend how part of his hand had disappeared, even though he knew exactly how the science added up. It just seemed far too much like magic for his poor mind to accept.

His yelp must have alerted Lucas, because suddenly he appeared at the door. He was holding a tray with a plate of toast upon it.

“I hope you got a good night’s sleep,” he said roughly. “I’ve got some work for you to do today.”

Oliver was on such a high from his invention he couldn’t conceal the enormous grin on his face.

“What are you smiling about?” Lucas challenged. “We’re going to be very busy today. It’s hard work. Tough. You think that’s funny?”

Still grinning, Oliver shook his head. “Is Armando back?” he asked politely.

Lucas looked suspicious. His eyes darted to the messy desk, the open textbook, and all the additional electronic components Oliver had been working with.

“Yes. Why?” he said with narrowed eyes.

Though Lucas wasn’t the person he wanted to get validation from, Oliver couldn’t help but blurt out his achievement.

“Because I did it! I invented invisibility!”

Far from looking impressed, Lucas glowered.

“Show me,” he snapped.

Oliver was still so thrilled by having solved it, he readily showed Lucas the square of fabric under the light, and the way it made a matching see-through square in the palm of his hand.

“It buzzes,” Oliver explained, “because of the current, which is a bit of a giveaway. So there’s still work to be done. But in terms of solving the first hurdle, well, I’ve done it.”

He still couldn’t quite believe he’d solved something that had eluded inventors for so long.

“Huh,” Lucas said. “Well, hand it here then. I’ll give it to Armando. He doesn’t want to be disturbed this morning. His day was very stressful yesterday and he’s tired.”

Instinctively, Oliver tightened his fist around the square of fabric. “I’d like to show him myself,” he refuted.

Lucas sighed loudly. “Look, boy, I need you on the factory floor. There’s some sweeping to be done. I promise you I’ll show this to Armando as soon as he’s free.”

“Sweeping?” Oliver asked, disgusted.

“Yes,” Lucas replied sternly. “Factory work is forty percent inventions and sixty percent cleaning up the mess.”

Oliver was caught in a bind. On the one hand he didn’t want to disappoint Armando by not doing the work that he was actually assigned to do, but on the other hand he really would much rather spend the entire day sewing another tiny square on the invisibility coat than sweeping the floors!

“Come on,” Lucas pressed.

Finally, with some reluctance, Oliver stood and headed for the door. Lucas stopped him at the threshold, hand outstretched, palm up.

“I think you’re forgetting something,” he said.

The invisibility fabric. Oliver still had it clenched in his hand. The last thing he wanted to do was hand it over to Lucas.

“I can keep it safe myself,” he said. “I’ll show Armando as soon as he’s ready.”

Lucas didn’t budge an inch. Oliver realized then that it wasn’t

up for discussion. Lucas was taking the fabric whether Oliver wanted him to or not. With a heavy sigh, he held out his hand and dropped the fabric into Lucas's palm. Just as before, a little square of invisibility appeared in the middle of his hand, making Oliver blink with the illogicalness of it.

Lucas turned the current on and off several times, staring as the patch of invisibility appeared then disappeared. Finally, he shoved the whole contraption in his pocket.

"The broom is in the kitchen," he said, his lips twitching into another one of his sly smirks. "I'm taking a break. When I get back, I want the factory floor spotless."

He stalked away hurriedly.

With an uneasy feeling about handing his invention over to Lucas, Oliver went to the kitchen to fetch the broom. He headed out to the factory floor dragging it behind him, the sensation of disquiet growing inside of him.

He reached the workbench and started to sweep. But that feeling in the back of his mind that something was amiss kept growing.

Suddenly, it occurred to him what the issue was. Lucas. He didn't trust him to hand the invisibility coat over to Armando at all. He'd always seemed out to get Oliver. Then it dawned on Oliver. What if Lucas was going to claim credit for his invention?

Oliver dropped the broom. It clattered to the floor as he ran, full pelt, across the factory, heading for Armando's office. But of course the winding, mazelike corridors were

too incomprehensible for him to navigate. He got lost, running around in circles, growing more and more confused.

Then he heard voices—Armando’s and Lucas’s. He followed the direction they were coming from. They became louder and louder as he reached a door that stood ajar.

Oliver was about to push the door open when he heard what Lucas was saying.

“I cracked it this morning. Stayed up all night. Can you believe it? After all those people trying, *I’m* the one to solve invisibility!”

Oliver gasped, horrified. Lucas *was* taking credit for his invention!

Through the door he caught a glimpse of Lucas with the small piece of invisible cloth in his hand.

“I am very impressed,” came Armando’s voice.

Oliver couldn’t believe what he was seeing and hearing. Lucas had backstabbed him! He was taking credit for Oliver’s hard work and Armando was falling for it!

He was just about to barge into the room when Lucas sharply turned. Through the small crack, Oliver knew he’d been caught. Lucas’s grin was sinister, and it grew even darker when he realized that Oliver had just witnessed him taking the credit for all his hard work.

With a final haughty glare, Lucas reached over and slammed the door in Oliver’s face, blocking him out and away from Armando before the inventor could even see he was there.

Staring at the wood just an inch from his nose, Oliver

floundered, stunned, feeling like the rug had been suddenly ripped from beneath his feet.

CHAPTER NINE

Oliver stood with his nose to the door for a moment, too shocked by Lucas's betrayal to even move. But just as he regained his senses, there came a noise from the other side of the factory.

Oliver startled and turned. There were men inside the factory! Men in suits. He gasped. Surely they weren't supposed to be there. A horrible thought crossed his mind: were they looking for him?

He ducked, not wanting to be seen, and peered through the balustrade at the men as they walked with purpose about the place. One was holding a clipboard, another a briefcase. Oliver managed to hear a snippet of their conversation.

"So you can see," a man with a pot belly and white hair was saying, "there's great potential here for redevelopment. We have planning permission to add another floor, and there's plumbing and electricity throughout the entire property."

Oliver realized then what was happening. One of these men was the landlord, and he was showing prospective buyers around the factory! Was he trying to sell it from under Armando's nose? Or did Armando know? Perhaps they were in financial difficulties.

Oliver's stomach clenched painfully. He'd only just decided the factory was where he belonged and now it might be taken away too. The thought of the factory disappearing just when he'd

found it was too much to bear.

He watched on helplessly as the landlord continued talking to the suited men, discussing finances. Then they all shook hands and headed back to the fake wall.

“We can get this silly wall removed,” the landlord added as he operated the mechanism to make it turn.

Then they disappeared around the other side of the rotating wall.

Oliver unfurled himself from his crouching position. He had to talk to Armando; about the men, about the invention. He couldn't just stand by and watch his world crumble around him.

He turned back to the door and knocked purposefully. The sound of muffled voices on the other side stopped.

“Come in,” Armando called out.

Oliver barged his way through the door and into Armando's office. It was the first time he'd been inside and fully seen the extent of chaos.

Armando had several desks of varying sizes dotted about the outer walls. Each was covered in stacks of paper, some high and teetering. There were books everywhere, strewn on chairs, crammed onto shelves, stacked in piles on the floor, and four computers, each from different eras.

“Oliver, my dear boy,” Armando said, looking up from behind one of the oldest-looking computer models that Oliver guessed was from the seventies. “How can I help you?”

Lucas was standing in a policeman's pose beside Armando.

He looked at Oliver sinisterly. “Yes, how can we help, Oliver? Are you struggling with your task today?”

Oliver narrowed his eyes at Lucas. He was scared to challenge him but he couldn’t stand by and watch the wicked man take credit for all his hard work and ingenuity.

“The coat,” Oliver began, his throat thickening with anxiety. “It’s... you know that it’s...”

“Marvelous,” Armando replied with a nod. “Quite marvelous.”

Beside him, Lucas looked triumphant.

“But—” Oliver tried.

Armando interrupted, “Actually, Lucas, I was meaning to ask whether you could collect the bats and owls. It’s time for their annual maintenance.”

“We have Oliver for that now,” Lucas replied.

“I need him today,” Armando replied. “You can show him how to operate the birds another time.”

Lucas hesitated. He looked indignant, like he’d sucked a lemon. Clearly he didn’t want to leave Oliver alone with Armando. But he had no choice. Armando had given him an instruction. So after a moment of floundering, he finally nodded and left the room, cheeks blazing.

The moment the door shut, Oliver turned to Armando.

“The coat!” he blurted. “I made the coat! It was me, not him!”

Armando chuckled and nodded. “I know, Oliver. It’s okay, I know.”

Oliver paused. “You know?”

“Yes, of course,” Armando replied. “Lucas doesn’t have the talent to make this.” He looked down at the invisible patch in his hand. “Nor the perseverance. I must say it’s quite amazing. You have a real talent, Oliver. I’m proud of you.”

Oliver felt all the fight leave his body. It was such a relief to know Armando had already figured it out and that he didn’t have to fight for recognition. But then he remembered the other reason he’d needed to see Armando; the men in suits. His anxiety came back in full force.

“Armando,” he said, “there were men in the factory. The landlord, I think. Is he trying to sell the place?”

Armando looked somewhat perturbed by the news. “The landlord was here? Ah. Yes. Well, you weren’t supposed to find out about that, Oliver. Financial problems are for me to worry about, not you.”

“So it’s true. The factory is in financial difficulties. What are we going to do? Will the factory close?”

Armando paused. He patted the seat next to him. “Come, Oliver. Let me talk to you.”

Oliver went and sat beside him, his stomach swirling with anticipation.

“It’s true that we are in a dire financial position,” Armando began. “And it is entirely my doing. All these years I’ve devoted my time, talent, and effort toward inventions to help mankind. And yet I’ve not succeeded in selling a single one.”

“The invisibility coat,” Oliver suggested. “We could definitely sell that. And for a lot of money, I bet. It would solve all our problems.”

Armando shook his head. “It’s not as simple as that. With great inventions come great responsibility. We cannot just sell an invention such as that to anyone. We must protect it. In the wrong hands, it can be used for great evil. In fact, I could have made a huge profit by selling my inventions to chemical and weapons companies, but I’ve always turned them down.”

Oliver was at least relieved to hear Armando put his morals first, but that didn’t mean their situation was any less woeful. Besides, he’d worked so hard on the coat he didn’t want it to be for nothing.

“There must be something we can do with the coat,” Oliver said.

Armando stroked his chin. “You’re right. We can’t just drop it and move on. Your success is a huge deal for the entire scientific community.”

“Maybe I could wire the rest of it,” Oliver said. “Then we could tour it around the country. Give talks at all the science fairs. We wouldn’t have to sell it if you’re worried about it falling into the wrong hands, but there must be some other way to make money from it.”

Armando nodded with enthusiasm. “I agree that it’s a major breakthrough. People the world over will be amazed by your achievement. We must do the rest of the rewiring, then sell the

coat to the correct people.” He tapped his chin. “I’ll assign the rewiring task to Lucas. There are other things for you to do. Things more suited to your particular talents...”

Oliver felt a little swell of pride in his chest. “What other things do you need me to work on?”

But Armando hesitated, as though in deep contemplation. Oliver’s sense of pride began to fade, replaced instead by a swirl of apprehension in his stomach.

“Armando?” he asked. “What things do you mean?”

Armando didn’t answer. He seemed to be in two minds about continuing the conversation. Oliver was struck with a sudden thought. Did Armando know something about his powers? Was that what he’d meant when he’d said there were other things more suited to Oliver’s talents?

Finally, Armando turned his misty eyes to Oliver. “I don’t think you’re ready to know,” he said, his tone solemn.

“Know what?” Oliver asked, his voice now trembling slightly. He thought of the broken table leg, of the man and woman in his visions. He added, more insistently now, “Please, I can handle it, whatever it is.”

Armando was quiet for a long time.

“Oliver,” he said finally. “You’re what is known as a Seer.”

“A what?” Oliver stammered. He’d never heard the term before.

“A Seer,” Armando repeated. “It’s a power you’re born with. And it’s a power that can be harbored, once you’ve learned how

to handle it.”

“Can you teach me?” Oliver asked. “Are you a Seer too?”

“Me?” Armando said. He shook his head. “No, dear boy. Not me. Not anyone. Throughout the entirety of history there have only been a few Seers. It’s not like they’re walking around all over the place. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were the only living Seer on earth.”

The thought hit Oliver like a bolt to the heart. What a lonely thing to exist with, being the only Seer. It was like being the last of a species.

“How do I learn then?” Oliver asked. “If I’m the only one? Who will teach me?”

Armando reached forward then and patted Oliver’s hands. “Enough. Let’s not ask any more questions, Oliver. I’ve already told you a lot. You need time to think about it and process it all. I don’t want to overwhelm you all in one day.”

“I need to know,” Oliver pleaded. “My whole life I’ve felt different and now I know that’s because I am. If there’s anything you’re keeping from me, please tell me now. I just want to know.”

Oliver’s throat felt dry and scratchy. His heart raced.

But Armando shook his head. “All I will tell you is that this is just the beginning for you. There is more to come. Much, much more.” He paused and looked deeply into Oliver’s eyes. “One day, Oliver Blue, you will save mankind.”

CHAPTER TEN

Oliver crawled into bed. He was so exhausted from the events of the day, from the bombshell Armando had dropped about him being a Seer.

But despite how strange and heavy his day had been, Oliver didn't approach sleep with any sense of dread. His dreams since arriving at the factory had been bizarre to say the least but never bad. Even with the weight of mankind now on his shoulders, Oliver was confident he would not have any nightmares.

It didn't take long for Oliver to fall into a deep slumber. In his dream, he was in the factory. It was the middle of the night and everything was very dark. All around him stood the giant robot machines that stood around the factory floor.

He heard a sound coming from the distance. He recognized it instantly as the whirring of an engine. As he peered through the gloom he saw a thin sliver of light coming from the direction of Armando's office.

He followed the light hurriedly, confused as the engine noise grew louder and louder, then hurried in through the door and blinked in the brightness of Armando's office.

It looked just the same as usual, except for one bizarre exception. There, standing in the middle of the room, was a large metal cocoon with frosted glass doors. It took up so much room there was hardly even any space to walk around it. Battling

against the roaring engines, Oliver called out.

“Armando? Where are you?”

There was no answer. Suddenly the machine fell silent. There was a hiss as the doors opened. Then something fell from inside.

Oliver flinched backward, overcome with horror. Because lying prone on the floor, staring upward with dead, unseeing eyes, was Armando.

Oliver gasped and sat up. He was back in his room, the nightmare over. His forehead was wet with perspiration.

Feeling unsettled by the dream, Oliver knew that sleep would not return to him. It was very early in the morning but he readied himself for the day anyway. Then he went out to the factory floor.

As he expected, it was very quiet. Lucas was probably still up in his room at the top of the red spiral staircase of his own special wing, and Armando would still be sleeping.

But then Oliver heard voices. They seemed to be coming from the other side of the fake wall. He hurried toward it and pressed his ear against it. The fake wall must have been made of plasterboard because he hardly had to strain to overhear what was being said.

“So you can see how valuable this technology could be to you,” said the first voice. It was unmistakably Lucas’s.

“It’s fantastic,” another voice replied. “I can see how we at ChemCorp can make use of such a genius piece of technology.”

Oliver gulped. He didn’t like what he was overhearing. ChemCorp must be short for Chemical Corporation. Could they

be one of the dangerous weapons manufacturers Armando had warned Oliver about? The ones he'd described as the wrong hands for his inventions? Lucas was clearly selling something to them.

Just then, Oliver heard the grating sound of the lever being pulled on the other side of the wall. He hurried away just as the turntable floor began to rotate and hid in a shadow cast by one of the giant bronze automatons.

Several suited men emerged from around the side of the wall. Confirming Oliver's suspicion, Lucas was amongst them. Then, with absolute horror, he saw that Lucas was holding the little patch of fabric he'd made invisible. Lucas was selling *his* invention! To a chemical company!

Oliver had seen enough. He darted through the shadows as quickly and quietly as he could, making a beeline for Armando's office.

He reached the closed door and began to knock. There was no answer from inside but Oliver opened the door anyway. Everything was in darkness. He flicked on the lights and let out a horrified gasp.

The room was in utter disarray, with papers everywhere and books fallen to the floor. Then Oliver saw something that made his blood run cold. Sticking out from beneath pieces of paper were two feet.

“Armando. No...!”

He hurried forward and began shoving paper out of the

way, revealing more and more of Armando's body as he did. He uncovered Armando's face and drew back with a gasp. Armando's eyes were open, staring upward, and he was gasping for breath like a fish out of water.

"Oliver," he croaked.

Oliver leaned forward, resting his hands on Armando's shoulders. "Let me help you. I'll call an ambulance."

He went to stand, but Armando grasped his overalls in a tight fist.

"Oliver..." he murmured again.

Oliver realized then that the old man was trying to tell him something. He fought his urge to run for the phone and crouched back down, bringing his ear closer to Armando's mouth so he didn't have to strain his voice.

"I always knew you'd come."

Oliver squinted at the old man's face, his gaze darting from one eye to the other. "What do you mean?"

"I knew. I was waiting for you. You have a destiny."

Oliver shook his head. There was no time for this. He needed to get Armando help. But the old man would not let him go.

"The room..." he mumbled.

He was becoming incoherent. Oliver tried to pry his hands off his overalls so he could escape and call for help.

"The room..." Armando said more insistently.

"What room?" Oliver asked with increasing panic. "Please, Armando, let me get you some help."

Armando was shaking his head. “No time. No time. Remember the time.”

“Remember the time? What do you mean?” Oliver couldn’t make sense of his words.

“Don’t forget!” Armando cried with urgency. “Don’t forget the time...”

Then the light left him completely. He slumped back, his clasp of Oliver releasing.

Feeling like he was in a nightmare, Oliver shook Armando. This couldn’t be real.

Then he let out a strangled wail. Armando was dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The tears came instantly. Oliver fell forward against Armando's chest, overcome with painful sobs. His whole body shook as he wept. He'd never felt grief like this.

What had he been trying to tell him with his dying breath? Something about time and destiny. It hadn't made any sense to Oliver at all.

Suddenly he heard footsteps coming from behind. He glanced over his shoulder, terrified. Through his tearstained vision he saw the formidable figure of Lucas.

"What did you do to him?" Oliver screamed. "You killed him!"

Lucas's expression was cold. He looked almost delighted by the scene before him.

"Me?" he questioned with faux innocence. "If anyone had a hand in his death, child, it's you. The stress you've put him under, with your constant questions and incessant demands. Not to mention all the extra work you've created for him, with that coat. No one his age and frailty could endure that. Anyway," he said with a nonchalant sigh, "the ambulance will be here shortly to take him away."

Oliver felt very scared. He began to tremble. But his arms were locked around Armando protectively. He didn't want anyone to take his hero away from him. And he didn't trust Lucas

to have really called an ambulance.

“What about the secret invention...” Oliver stammered. “The future of mankind...”

Lucas barked out a laugh. “Oh, *that*. Armando was prone to flights of melodrama. Honestly, he did suffer somewhat from self-importance.” He shrugged. It was as if the passing of his lifelong colleague was nothing more than an inconvenience to him. “Don’t worry yourself about any of that. It was all mumbo-jumbo. The factory is mine now and so are all of Armando’s inventions. About time too. There’s plenty of things to sell but Armando always kept them secret and hidden.” He rolled his eyes.

“You can’t do this,” Oliver cried. “You can’t sell everything Armando worked on!”

“Yes, I can,” Lucas replied coldly. “And I will. Your inventions too. They all belong to me. And what I will also do is get rid of the riffraff Armando brought with him. You and that mangy dog are no longer welcome here. I’ve already called the police to report you trespassing on my property and your theft of my inventions. You’re going to jail for a long time.”

Oliver felt as if his whole world was collapsing upon him. Suddenly, he saw that Lucas was no longer alone. Two burly security guards had appeared behind him.

“Seize him!” Lucas bellowed.

Oliver had to do something, to escape somehow. In desperation, he leapt up and raced toward the guards at the door.

He barreled straight through their legs, his small stature proving beneficial in eluding them just as it had that time with Chris and his cronies.

Out in the corridor, Oliver raced along, weaving through the labyrinth in hopes of losing his pursuers. But he could hear their clattering footsteps not far behind, chasing him through the network of rooms and corridors.

If he could make it to the factory floor he'd be able to escape through the mechanized wall. But that part of the factory was completely exposed and he'd give away his location. And worse, the wall rotated slow enough that they'd be able to grab him before he'd even made it ninety degrees. He had to hide. But where?

It struck Oliver then. There was one place that Lucas couldn't chase him, one place that he didn't have clearance to enter. And that was Armando's secret room. The only problem was, Oliver didn't have access to it either. But he did have something Lucas didn't. He was a Seer. He had powers. Maybe he'd be able to open the steel doors with his mind.

As he ran for the secret room, he could hear the security staff behind him, their footsteps pounding. The steel door came into sight. Oliver knew it was locked and almost impenetrable. And he didn't know enough about being a Seer or how to wield his powers on command. But he was going to have to try.

Concentrating very hard, he tried to switch into the mindset needed to conjure them. A feeling of immense energy flowed

into him.

He concentrated his mind on the steel doors, imagining them opening, succumbing to the power of his mind. But nothing happened. As he drew closer to the steel doors they remained shut.

Oliver could hear the security guards gaining on him. Panicking, he looked behind him. He saw the guards and Lucas at the other end of the corridor. But to his surprise, the three of them were held back by Horatio. The dog was growling, gnashing his teeth, and snapping his jaws.

With Horatio distracting them, Oliver turned his focus back to the door. He gritted his teeth. His heart pounded. He channeled everything he could muster into focusing on the doors opening. Then, suddenly, he heard a squeal. Something in the metal was starting to give.

With another sound of churning, twisting metal, the doors suddenly flew open like two metal jaws inviting in their prey. Oliver didn't even stop to wonder whether he really had done that with his mind. Instead, he hurried straight into the secret room. The doors snapped shut behind him.

Though he'd been afforded a moment of reprieve, Oliver wasn't about to relax. There was hardly any time to take in what he was seeing. The room was dome-shaped and a series of steps led down from the door he'd entered to the lower level. Here there was a barrier, a sort of fence that encircled the strangest sight Oliver had ever seen.

It was a swirling pool of dark black and purple. The whole thing reminded him of the Bird's Eye View invention Armando had shown him, but on a much bigger, grander scale. And the substance swirling inside it was less like clouds and more like the swirling vortex of a storm. Lightning forked across the surface.

Oliver hurried to the side, standing beside the barrier, awed and fearful. What could it be?

Just then, Oliver heard pounding on the door. The security guards were trying to batter it down. By the sound of it they were using some kind of battering tool. Oliver wondered how long the doors would hold and keep them out. For all he knew, his powers may have weakened them. There could only be a matter of seconds left for him to make some kind of decision.

Oliver stared down into the swirling vortex. Whatever it was, Armando had believed it would be necessary in the survival of the human species. But on the other hand, he'd been trying to protect Oliver from it, to keep him away from it as long as possible. Whatever it was, it was a thing of immense glory, an invention with shocking magical properties.

The pounding on the doors grew louder. Oliver tore his gaze from the vortex over his shoulder and saw a huge indentation in the middle of the door. They were getting through, quicker than he'd have expected.

There was no time to waste. Oliver hurried around the vortex, searching for any sign as to what the machine might be, or how it might be operated.

At last he caught sight of a large button on the wall. It was a huge red push button, the type you'd expect to operate a nuclear weapon. Pressing it seemed like the last thing Oliver should do, and yet some instinctive knowledge within him knew it was precisely what he had to.

He ran for it, just as the steel doors yielded to another blow. They were opening a crack now, enough for him to see Lucas and the security guards on the other side. The battering ram they'd been using was thrown to the side and in its place was a large jack, the type that could be used to winch a vehicle as big as a monster truck. In just a matter of moments, they'd be inside.

Without another second to deliberate, Oliver slammed his palm on the big red button.

Immediately, the purple vortex began to swirl. And from inside came the sound of ticking. Not the ticking of a bomb, but the ticking of a clock. An enormous clock. The ticking grew louder and faster, and a display screen that had been in darkness before came suddenly to life. There was a string of red numbers upon it and they were quickly counting backward. It took Oliver a matter of seconds to work out that he was staring at a date—year, month, day, hour, minute, second—and that they were reducing at an increasingly fast pace.

The pieces all clicked into place. Armando had told him to remember the time. The vortex was a time machine! Oliver's quest, his destiny to save mankind, meant going back in time.

Suddenly, the doors behind him sprang fully open. In bounded

Lucas and his security. They ran for him, arms outstretched.

Without missing a beat, Oliver ran full pelt for the vortex, propelling himself as fast as his legs could go. The guards were right behind him, barely millimeters from grasping him. With every ounce of power he possessed, Oliver leapt. He felt fingers clasp onto his leg but it was too late, he was already airborne, the force in his leap strong enough to overpower the fingertips that had only just caught him.

Suddenly, he was over the barrier. Now there was nothing between him and the vortex. He squeezed his eyes shut and plunged inside. With an enormous flash of white light, Oliver Blue disappeared.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oliver opened his eyes to discover he was standing in the same room he'd been in before. Only now the swirling purple vortex was gone. Gone, too, were Lucas and his security men. Instead, smoke was swirling from the time machine.

A second later, there was a huge explosion. Lights flashed. Black smoke billowed upward. The force sent Oliver flying backward. He hit the wall hard and his head spun from the impact.

Stars obscured his vision and the smoke blinded him. But as the smoke cleared, Oliver saw the destruction that lay ahead of him. The time machine was gone. Not just broken, but completely eradicated, as if it had never existed.

Suddenly, some debris from the machine clunked to the ground before him. They looked like the wooden numbers you'd get to keep score at a baseball game. They read: 1944.

Oliver blinked and looked around. Had he really gone back in time? Back to 1944? And had his only way home just gone up in smoke? Was he stuck here in the past?

He pulled himself to standing. Cautiously, he walked to the door of the room. It wasn't made of steel anymore but thick, dark oak.

Unsure of what awaited him on the other side, Oliver tried the handle. It turned easily and yielded to his force. He pushed open

the door, his stomach in knots of anticipation.

The sight awaiting him stole the breath from his lungs. Instead of a rabbit warren of winding corridors, the other side was a large, open-plan warehouse. It was like the main factory floor where he'd worked with Lucas, only double the size. And it was a hive of activity. People bustled all over the place, carrying scrolls of paper and planks of wood, wearing hard hats and boots.

Oliver could hear the sound of pistons turning, of steam engines and hissing hydraulics. Everything was so shiny! The rusted brass giants of Armando's present-day factory gleamed under the bright strip lights, looking brand new and luxurious, almost as if they were made from gold rather than copper. The huge windows of the factory—boarded up in the present day—were open now, letting in vast shards of light. The floorboards were polished to perfection, a warm chestnut color instead of the dusty, dull brown of today.

Oliver caught sight of a team of workers on different-sized wooden ladders, screwdrivers in hands, working on each of the joints of a mechanical giant. They were dressed in the same blue overalls Oliver was wearing now, the ones he'd taken from the mechanic's closet which Armando had said were left by his workers after the war.

"Get out the way, kid!" a voice cried.

Oliver turned to see two men carrying a large steel girder. He ducked just in time.

Once they'd passed, he stood, and his gaze fell upon a very

familiar face.

“Armando...” Oliver said aloud.

The inventor looked exactly like he did in the photograph in Oliver’s inventors book; seventy years younger, with the fresh, unblemished face of a twenty-year-old. He was even wearing the exact same loose cotton shirt and dark corduroy trousers as in the photo, the same waistcoat and tool belt. And his walking stick was nowhere to be seen.

Oliver couldn’t believe his eyes. But there was no denying it; he really had gone back in time. Back to a time when Armando was still alive. Back to 1944.

Though the shock and confusion was profound, Oliver was so thrilled to see Armando alive again that all he could feel was joy. He waved his arms over his head, jumped up and down, and called out across the din of the factory floor, “Armando! Armando!”

But his voice was lost in the hubbub of the busy factory. The inventor didn’t see Oliver’s frantic waving either; he was too busy looking at some schematics on a table, peering at them with a microscope monocle.

Oliver, however, did not go completely unnoticed. A young boy standing beside Armando looked up and locked eyes with him.

Immediately, Oliver recoiled. He knew that face, those eyes. It was Lucas.

Oliver dropped his arms and stepped back, like Lucas was a

magnet repelling him. Even as a youngster, Lucas looked sinister. His pale eyes were piercing.

Oliver watched on as the young Lucas tugged at Armando's loose sleeve, trying to get his attention. Armando was so busy he didn't immediately react to the boy tugging at him. But eventually he turned to look at Lucas. Oliver watched as Lucas spoke to the busy inventor, then pointed over at him.

Oliver gulped as Armando's eyes searched the factory hall for him, his frown deepening, his expression confused. Then their eyes met. Oliver felt a spark of grief inside; there was a clear lack of recognition in Armando's eyes. This Armando did not know him. Not even slightly. Not even a flicker. His heart sank.

Suddenly, he felt hands tighten on the tops of his arms. He looked up—left then right—and saw two guards either side of him. They'd each gotten ahold of his arms under the pits.

"This is private property," one said.

"How'd you get in here?" the other demanded.

"It's a long story," Oliver said, swallowing. "In about seventy years' time..."

The guards gave each other a look over his head. Then, without another word, they began to haul him away.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Oliver protested, trying to dig his heels in.

But it was no use. The guards were far too strong. Oliver glanced back over his shoulder at Armando, appealingly.

"Armando! Help! It's me! It's Oliver!"

But the inventor had already gone back to his work. Only

Lucas observed the scene, his pale eyes penetrating like a hawk's, a small smile of evil delight upon his lips.

Oliver was hauled roughly to the door of the factory. The guards heaved it open. Then, with no ceremony, he was thrown straight through it.

Oliver tumbled to the ground as the door slammed shut behind him. He lay there in a dazed heap. It was the first time he'd been outside the factory since he'd entered. Except where he'd come out wasn't the same place he'd gone in.

Slowly, he picked himself up to sitting. As he wiped the dust from his overalls, he glanced around. He wasn't anywhere familiar at all. He hadn't been thrown out into the same world he knew, but somewhere else entirely.

Not somewhere, Oliver corrected himself. But somewhen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oliver stared mournfully back at the factory he was now barred from. It had been his home for such a short amount of time but it meant more to him than any home he'd ever lived in. He didn't know what he would do without it.

From the outside, its differences from his version—the one that existed more than seventy years in the future—were even more startling. The faded red bricks were bright. The rainwater stains and splatters of bird poop were completely absent. Where before there had been caved in roof tiles and smashed up windows, now everything was exactly as it should be. The ivy that had overtaken the factory's facade in Oliver's era was little more than a manageable shrub, and the nettles that had stung him as he'd first explored the perimeter were nonexistent. There was even a factory sign, *Illstrom's Inventions*, in the same retro typography style of old World War Two posters. And over the road, the rusted bus stop sign from where he'd first alighted the bus was brand new and gleaming.

“Now what?” Oliver said aloud.

He cast his mind back to the moment he'd jumped into the vortex. It hadn't been his intention to go back in time, he'd not planned it, but in the heat of the moment and under the pursuit of Lucas and his guards, something had compelled him to run to the secret room, to jump into the swirling purple vortex. Could

it be a part of his destiny? Some kind of force beyond his control guiding him? And if this was where he was supposed to be, then why? What happened next?

At a loss, Oliver wandered the streets. The previously dilapidated neighborhood looked brand new. Houses that in the present day were graffitied and falling into disrepair, were clean and well cared for. The overgrown gardens filled with trash in Oliver's modern memory were neatly trimmed and full of flowers.

The other warehouses, dotted between the houses, were also alive with activity. Oliver read their signs as he passed, and noted how each one was constructing something for the war effort; everything from thermoplastic glass to pistols, boots to bullets. It was astonishing to see the whole neighborhood alive with people, buzzing with activity.

But Oliver had no idea what to do now. Where to turn. In trying to save Armando, he had accidentally gone back in time. And yes, Armando was alive in this era, as a fresh-faced young man, but that was hardly a solution to the problem! What was Oliver to do now? He couldn't just live his entire life in the 1940s.

Just as his racing mind began to panic, Oliver noticed someone partially concealed by shadows, leaning against the wall watching him. Oliver was startled by the sudden appearance of a stranger, and watched cautiously as the figure kicked off the wall and emerged into the daylight.

He was a tall, gangly boy, who looked older than Oliver.

Thirteen, he guessed. There seemed to be a kindness about him. He had warm green eyes and a splatter of freckles on a crooked nose. Curly dark hair and dimples only added to his friendly demeanor.

“You look lost,” he said as he idled over to Oliver. “Can I help you?”

Oliver wanted to tell the boy that he was indeed lost, but in actual fact that wasn't the truth. He knew exactly *where* he was. The problem was *when* he was.

Tongue-tied, Oliver looked up into his face. The boy frowned. He seemed perplexed by Oliver's hesitation.

“How about we tell each other our names first?” the boy said, kindly. He held out a hand to Oliver. “I'm Ralph Black.”

Oliver looked at the hand, the extension of friendship. Though somewhat wary of this stranger who'd appeared out of nowhere, Oliver had never needed a friend so much in his life as he did right now. And Ralph certainly *seemed* trustworthy.

After some deliberation, Oliver took the boy's bony-fingered hand in his own and shook.

“I'm Oliver,” he said. “Oliver Blue.”

Ralph's expression suddenly changed, from one of open friendliness to one of complete shock. His green eyes widened.

“*You're* Oliver?” he exclaimed. “Are you really? What a stroke of luck! I thought you'd be older! Taller, too.”

The news seemed to be very welcome to Ralph but Oliver had no idea why. Ralph started circling him, suddenly enthused,

commenting aloud on how Oliver just wasn't what he'd been expecting. Oliver wanted to know exactly how Ralph had been expecting anything in the first place! How could there be a boy in 1944 who was waiting to meet him?

"I really thought I was going to have to be waiting much longer to find you," Ralph said.

He pulled Oliver in for a hug, then let go and held Oliver by the shoulders at arm's length.

"What's with the outfit?" he asked, frowning curiously. "You trying to go incognito? Good thing I spoke to you because I'd never have realized it was you in that garb. Could've completely missed you. I was expecting you to be in jeans and a shirt. That's what kids from the third millennium wear, isn't it?"

Oliver looked down at his 1940s overalls. It was true that he blended right in with the era.

"It's a long story," Oliver said, not really sure what was going on. "Wait. The third millennium? What do you mean by that?"

The whole exchange was utterly baffling to Oliver. But at the same time he couldn't help but get caught up in Ralph's excitement. Even though he didn't understand how or why, it was very evident to him now that he was supposed to be here. He was supposed to be in 1944, standing outside Illstrom's Inventions with this boy, Ralph Black. It made him feel a lot less lost to know he was no longer floundering around helplessly in the past on his own.

"Come on then," Ralph said brightly, ignoring his question.

“No point hanging around here. We’d better go.”

“Go?” Oliver asked. “Go where?”

Ralph stopped and looked at him, frowning. “School,” he stated. “Obviously.” When all Oliver did was raise his eyebrows in confusion, Ralph added, “I mean, that’s why you came here, isn’t it? Why you came back to 1944?”

Oliver shook his head. “I... no, not really. I didn’t mean to come back in time. It was sort of an accident.”

Ralph looked puzzled. But it lasted only briefly before he gave a nonchalant shrug. “Well, it’s not like history is fixed. And I guess I wouldn’t have been sent here to wait for you if there was no chance of you turning up early. This must be a timeline where you come back in time accidentally rather than after being told that you’re supposed to.” He shrugged again. “Anyway, we’d better go. We don’t want to miss dinner.”

He went to walk away but Oliver wasn’t about to just follow. He stood his ground.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand,” he said to Ralph’s back.

Ralph stopped and turned to face him, blinking as if perplexed. “Don’t understand what?”

“That I came back in time to go to school,” Oliver stammered. “It doesn’t make any sense!”

“Of course it does,” Ralph said, pacing back to where Oliver was standing. “How else are you supposed to learn?”

“How about at one of the million schools that exist in the third millennium!” Oliver told him, repeating his strange phraseology

from earlier and throwing his arms wide with exasperation.

Ralph looked even more confused. “What are you talking about? There’s only one school in the entirety of the universe that teaches Seers!”

Oliver froze. Seers. He thought about Armando, about how he’d started to tell him about how he was a Seer before abruptly ending the conversation.

“You mean to say...” Oliver began, his voice a stunned whisper.

Ralph interrupted. “Yes. I’m taking you to the School for Seers. You are a Seer, aren’t you? Untrained and in need of study?”

Oliver paced away, shaking his head with disbelief. This was what Armando had been keeping from him! This school in the past that he was supposed to attend!

But then he remembered how Armando had told him he was the only living Seer in the world. Confused, he turned back to Ralph.

“Are you a Seer too?”

Ralph grinned. “Yup.”

“But how?” Oliver asked. “I was told I was the only one in the world.”

Ralph began to chuckle. “A trick of semantics,” he said. “Whoever told you that had a bit of a sense of humor.”

Oliver frowned. There wasn’t anything funny about any of this as far as he was concerned.

“Please,” he said to Ralph. “I’ve gone through a lot and my mind is jumbled. Can you please just explain things to me in a way I can understand?”

Ralph took him by the shoulders. “I’m taking you to the School for Seers so you can train and learn to hone your powers. All the Seers from all the different dimensions come here to learn. So yes, you may have been the only Seer in your world, but there are many, many more of us, all from different timelines and parallel worlds. We all come here, to this exact time and place at some point in our lives, because it’s the only one where the School for Seers exists.”

Oliver felt like he’d been winded. It took all his effort just to suck air into his lungs. Any second now, he felt like he might faint from shock. This was all too much to take in. If it hadn’t been for Ralph’s steady hand on his shoulder, he might just have fallen to his knees.

Breathing deeply, he gazed up into Ralph’s trusting green eyes. “And you’re telling the truth?” Oliver challenged. It was as if part of his mind just couldn’t accept or believe this could be real. “There really are more Seers? A whole school of students?”

If the boy was telling the truth then he wasn’t the only Seer alive. There were more like him. He wasn’t a weird loner freak.

“There’s plenty more where I came from,” Ralph said with a nod. “Well, not *where* but *when*. You know what I mean.”

Oliver didn’t, not fully, but it was starting to sink in. And the more it did, the crazier it seemed.

He paced away from Ralph, running his trembling fingers through his sandy blond hair, and muttered aloud, “A school that trains Seers? In a precise moment in time and space?” He looked back at Ralph. “And you were told to come and collect me, from this exact point in time?”

Ralph nodded. “Well, not a precise *time* as such. Like I said, history can change. But, yes, more or less, I was told to come and find you.”

Oliver couldn’t wrap his head around it. The mere concept of parallel worlds was a paradox. Theoretically possible but impossible in practice. But right now Oliver had much more pressing questions than how such a thing was possible. What he really needed to know was...

“*Why?*”

Ralph frowned. “Why what?”

“*Why?*” Oliver repeated. “Why is there a school for Seers? Why were you sent for me? Why am I supposed to go there?”

Ralph paused for a long moment, twisting his mouth to the side as though in deep contemplation. Finally, he shrugged.

“I don’t know exactly,” he explained. “Professor Amethyst—he’s the head teacher, by the way—told me that if you find out everything in one go your mind explodes. Literally. So you’ll get all the answers to your specific whys eventually. But in the meantime, the general gist is that you have a special role to play in protecting humanity. An important quest that you’ll need to train your powers for.”

He said it with such a blasé tone that Oliver could almost accept that it was no big deal. Only it was a big deal. It was a very big deal indeed! Everything Ralph had told him bordered on lunacy. What if he'd just wandered into the path of a madman and fallen for his ramblings?

But no. Time travel was real. He'd seen it with his own eyes. And Armando had told him he was a Seer. What were the chances of him crossing paths with a mad boy who just happened to know about Seers? It was far more likely that Ralph was exactly who he said he was, that Oliver himself really was destined to attend the School for Seers.

But what if he didn't want to? What if he just wanted a normal life?

He thought of the alternative: Campbell Junior High. Other than Ms. Belfry's science class, the place was awful. Would he really prefer to go back to his old life, to Chris's bullying and Mr. Portendorfer calling him Oscar to purposely annoy him? And what about Armando? Back in Oliver's life, his hero and mentor was dead. But here, in 1944, Armando was alive. If he stayed and developed his powers, was there a chance he could change the course of history and save Armando's life in the present day?

"I can tell you're not convinced," Ralph said, interrupting his swirling thoughts. "There's still time to turn around if you want to. A small window of time. But I wouldn't if I were you. You might not get another chance to come back. It's not like people can just walk in and out of the School for Seers whenever they

want to. If you go now, you might never be able to come back to this point in time and space.”

Oliver shook his head, grappling with his dilemma. “It’s just a big decision to make. I don’t even know you. You could be lying about everything.”

“I can prove it to you,” Ralph said. “Although, Doctor Ziblatt called me the worst student the School for Seers has ever had. So you’ll have to bear with me.”

He grinned, clearly unfazed by the moniker, then reached down and picked up a crisp leaf from the sidewalk. He placed it in his palm and turned his attention to it. Oliver watched on curiously.

Ralph’s gaze became very soft and unfocused, like someone going into a state of hypnosis. For a long time nothing happened. Oliver started to feel even more like this was all some crazy hoax, or something he was imagining. But then, the leaf began to change. Very slowly, its sides began to curl inward. Oliver gasped as he realized it was starting to shrivel and die. Its orange color dulled to brown. Then suddenly it turned to powder in Ralph’s palm before blowing away on the gentle breeze.

Oliver’s mouth fell open. He looked up at Ralph in shock and awe. He’d never seen anything like it. But here was the evidence. It was all real. It really was.

“Phew,” Ralph said, wiping perspiration from his forehead. “I was worried that wasn’t going to work.”

He smiled, quickly returning to his jovial self, to the kind,

green-eyed boy who put Oliver at ease.

“So?” he asked. “There’s still time to change your mind. You don’t have to find out about your quest if you don’t want to. But take it from me, you won’t find any answers back in your old life.” His tone took on a gentle cajoling. “Come to the School for Seers with me and find out what your destiny really is. Come on.”

Oliver stood frozen to the spot. His mind repeated over and over the moment of magic Ralph had shown him, while the boy’s words echoed in his ears. It was a monumental choice to make.

Except, what choice did he really have? The time machine that had brought him here had blown up. It didn’t exist anymore. He was stuck. Either he wandered around aimlessly in the past, or he took a chance and went to the school.

With a gulp, Oliver made up his mind. “Okay. I’ll do it. I’m coming with you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ralph and Oliver headed along the street, which was familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time, with shorter buildings and not a single high-rise blotting the horizon. Strange old cars passed them, the men inside wearing fedora hats. Many of the lots weren't even developed yet, though in Oliver's time there were warehouses or apartments buildings there. They passed a school where children in old-fashioned gray clothing played with wooden hoops. It all felt so strange and eerie to Oliver. He could still not quite believe he was in 1944.

They reached an old sign between two warehouses and Ralph stopped, then pointed up. Oliver drew up beside him and looked up. The sign was made of wood and iron, the type you'd see in a historic village outside the drinking tavern. Oliver noticed a symbol embossed into the rusted iron. It looked like a ring, or a hoop. At three evenly spaced intervals around the hoop was the same image of an eye.

“What is that?” Oliver asked.

“That is the symbol for the School for Seers,” Ralph said. “A loop to signify that time isn't linear, and the eyes to signify seeing in all directions; present, future, and past. Only Seers can see the symbol. For the rest of the world, this is just an ordinary sign. Whenever you see the symbol, it will guide you back to the school. Right this way.”

He bounded off. Oliver thought Ralph seemed far too nonchalant about everything. His laid-back attitude was in stark contrast to how Oliver felt. Oliver felt like the ground was barely solid beneath his feet, like his whole life had been tipped upside down and shaken around. He'd hardly had time to come to grips with his new status as a Seer before Armando's death, his sudden propulsion back in time, and the meeting with Ralph. His head was still spinning from it all.

Oliver followed Ralph into the shadowy back alley. He shivered. It was much colder in the darkness. He was only wearing his thin workman's overalls. He felt very underprepared for whatever was about to happen.

There were many other passageways coming off the alley, and Oliver followed Ralph down a very narrow one. It reminded him of the mazelike corridors of Armando's factory, and the strangely narrow one that led to his secret room. The walls on either side of him were very high; there was only a sliver of sky above his head. At points the alleyway became so narrow his shoulders brushed the walls either side.

At last they stopped and Ralph crouched down beside a shrub growing beneath another three-eyed hoop symbol. He parted the leaves and Oliver saw there was a switch hidden within it. Ralph pressed the switch. The wall suddenly disappeared, revealing instead a door-sized gap within the brickwork.

Oliver gasped. It was just like his invisibility coat but in reverse. Instead of hiding something real, it was creating

something not real.

“It’s visual trickery,” Ralph explained, as he studied Oliver’s expression. “The illusion of something solid.”

Oliver thought about the technology needed to make it work. There were no lights to project an image. It wasn’t a holograph. Though his invisibility coat had been a theoretical possibility before he’d made it a reality, there was no theory to explain this.

“Amazing,” Oliver said. “I’d love to study the mechanisms. I’m something of an inventor myself, you see.”

He looked away from the shrub to discover Ralph had already gone. He was halfway up the alleyway ahead of them. “Turn it back on once you’re in, won’t you?” he called back over his shoulder. “Don’t want any non-Seers wandering through by accident!”

Oliver got the distinct impression that they were in something of a hurry. Ralph certainly didn’t seem to be dawdling.

Quickly, he stepped through the gap and pressed the light switch on the other side. The brick illusion reappeared, giving him the unnerving feeling of having been bricked in. He hurried after Ralph.

The alleyway they now followed was not only narrow, but there was no daylight coming from above at all. It occurred to Oliver that they were now inside some kind of building. But inside where was a mystery.

Up ahead, Ralph strode purposefully onward. Oliver noticed he was now stooping. The ceiling had become visible above

them, and it sloped closer and closer as they progressed along the corridor, making the space become shorter. Oliver bent his head as the ceiling came ever closer, then his knees, until there wasn't enough space to even stand. Just as Ralph was doing ahead of him, Oliver had no choice but to crawl on his hands and knees. They weren't in a corridor anymore at all, but a tunnel. Oliver fought his feelings of claustrophobia.

Suddenly, Oliver slammed into Ralph's backside. He'd stopped crawling and was positioning himself so he was sitting on his backside.

"This is the fun part," Ralph told him. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" Oliver asked.

But it was too late. Suddenly, Ralph tumbled forward and disappeared.

With a shocked gasp, Oliver scrambled to the place he'd last been. He saw a square opening, no bigger than the end of an air vent. It was covered in a sort of net, like thick spider web. Inside the vent it was pitch-black.

"Ralph!" Oliver yelled, panicking. "Ralph, where are you? Are you okay? Ralph! Answer me!"

There was a moment of silence before Ralph's disembodied reply came from somewhere in the darkness. "Come on!" He sounded as if he was calling from somewhere very far away.

Oliver let out a breath of relief. At least Ralph was okay; he hadn't just plunged into oblivion.

"Where are you?" Oliver called back. "I can't see anything."

“It’s a slide,” Ralph’s voice called, weaker from being even farther away.

A slide?

“There’s a net in the way,” Oliver shouted into the abyss. He heard Ralph’s faint reply. “It’s just another illusion...” Then there was silence.

Tentatively, Oliver reached his hand forward, expecting to feel the sensation of thread against his skin. But sure enough, he felt nothing. His hand passed straight through the “net” without resistance. It really was another illusion.

Oliver knew there was only one option. He had to follow Ralph. But leaping into the unknown was easier said than done.

He took a deep breath and steadied his nerves. He had done harder things in his life, after all, like walking into classrooms as the new boy, under the prying eyes of kids who judged him. This was nothing in comparison.

Oliver squeezed his eyes shut and, from his seated position, pushed himself over the edge.

His stomach flipped as he plummeted. Then he was soaring along the smooth slide. It was very fast and very twisty, like a waterslide in a theme park. He went so fast he could feel the wind rushing past his ears. If he hadn’t been so shocked by everything, he might even have enjoyed it.

Then all at once, Oliver landed on something soft. He opened his eyes. He was in a brightly lit space, lying on his back, bouncing up and down gently on a trampoline.

Oliver touched his body, almost surprised to find himself still in one piece. He blinked, his eyes adjusting to the light.

Then suddenly, Ralph's face appeared above him, grinning widely. Oliver was relieved to see him again.

But Ralph left Oliver no time to catch his breath. He dragged him unceremoniously off the trampoline by the arms. Oliver landed, panting, on hard floorboards.

He looked up and discovered they were on a kind of wooden walkway. It ran all around the inside perimeter of the room, with the central area completely open. A glass barrier provided protection from what looked like a very large drop.

“Oliver Blue,” Ralph said, “welcome to the School for Seers.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Standing beside the glass barrier, Oliver peered down into the belly of the School for Seers. The sight was astounding.

It went down at least forty floors and looked like a sprawling, modern university. Spanning the gap of the central atrium were a series of crisscrossing walkways and upon them walked students, with books in their arms and grins on their faces. There were so many of them. So many kids just like Oliver himself.

He watched, wide-eyed, as all the students rushed around, hurrying to their next classes. They seemed to be moving very fast, as if someone had sped them up. Oliver suddenly realized that all the walkways were conveyor belts.

As soon as people disappeared through the doors coming off the walkways, another door would open and a whole new load of students would file out, hurrying off in different directions, speeding along the conveyor belts.

There was something hypnotic about the view. It was like looking down upon a colony of ants; everyone with a place to be, everyone hurrying, and yet everything working in complete synchronicity.

It was almost too much to take in, and everything was far more modern than Oliver had expected. He noticed a huge tropical tree far, far below him, so far that even its tallest branches couldn't reach them.

“This is amazing,” Oliver gasped.

“Just wait until I show you the rest,” Ralph said with a grin. “I have enough time to give you a quick tour before dinner.”

They headed along the walkway, Oliver glancing all around him, taking in the sights of the unfamiliar place. He felt as if his head was spinning.

“Professor Amethyst is the headmaster,” Ralph said over his shoulder. “His office is up here on the top floor. You’ll get to meet him eventually but he’s often in another dimension.”

They headed for an elevator, which was made of glass, and got inside. Oliver noticed all the floor numbers had a negative sign preceding them. The entire school was underground, he noted, though it would be impossible to guess since the ceiling looked exactly like a skylight letting in real light, and the whole place was so bright, the air so fresh, that it was almost impossible to believe it was synthetic light or air conditioning.

“Professor Amethyst doesn’t teach any classes,” Ralph continued as the elevator doors closed. “We have tutors instead. Three main ones: Doctor Zibblatt, Mr. Lazzarato, and Coach Finkle.”

Ralph hit the button for the ground floor and the elevator suddenly plummeted, uncomfortably quickly. Oliver grabbed the handrail, his stomach flipping. Through the glass windows he saw all the different floors whizzing by.

“You get used to the speed,” Ralph laughed, raising his voice to be heard over the whooshing wind. “With a place this big,

it's important to get around quickly. Which is ironic now I think about it, since the school exists outside of time.”

Oliver felt too nauseous to even question what Ralph had just said. He decided he was just going to have to accept all the weird goings-on. There'd be time to process everything later. Hopefully.

They reached the final floor, -50, and the doors of the elevator opened. Oliver's legs wobbled as he exited. He felt like he'd just been on a rollercoaster.

Down in the belly of the building, Oliver could really feel the hubbub, a sort of pulsing sensation as though the place were alive and breathing. Here he could smell the amazing scent of fresh vegetation, and he recognized the central tree was a kapok, one of the most enormous breeds of tree on the planet. Usually they'd be found in rainforests, but this one seemed to be thriving in its very own ecosystem. Its trunk was so thick it would take ten people with linked arms to encircle it, and its buttress roots coiled and snaked across the ground. It had millions of limbs holding up the various walkways of the atrium.

Looking up from below was quite a different experience, because now the ceiling was so far away it looked like nothing more than a slit of light. Yet, still, the whole place was bright with what felt in every sense like real daylight.

“How is it so bright down here?” Oliver asked, curiously.

“Something to do with mirrors,” Ralph explained. “Someone told me on my first day but I didn't quite understand. Apparently

if you angle mirrors you can create light...”

“Like with a periscope,” Oliver added. He, of course, knew all about periscopes from his inventors book, not to mention from his task redesigning the one on the tank in the factory.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Ralph nodded in affirmation. “You’re pretty smart for a, what, twelve-year-old?”

“Eleven,” Oliver corrected. He wondered again how old Ralph was. He was tall and his confidence certainly made him seem older. “What about you?”

“I’m thirteen,” Ralph said. “But I’m a first-year like you. We don’t train according to our age. Most the students here are somewhere between ten and sixteen. It all depends on when Professor Amethyst finds out about their existence and calls for them. I guess it’s very complicated following the thread of a single person when there are numerous timelines and countless dimensions.” He gave another nonchalant shrug. “Anyway, come this way. I want you to see the fun stuff, not just the place where all the classrooms are.”

He headed for a large door marked S. Oliver followed, frowning, curious.

“What does S stand for?” he asked.

Ralph wiggled his eyebrows. “Sports.”

He pushed open the large doors and Oliver gasped. Inside, the room was the same size of the whole atrium they’d just left, but instead of walkways and students rushing to classrooms, this one was filled with every kind of sports place imaginable, each one

contained within a glass box, suspended at various levels. On the floor above, two students were playing tennis, above them two others were jousting. On the opposite side a basketball game was in full swing, and a couple of levels above was an entire baseball field. Crossing across the vast space was a ski slope, weaving in and out of a bobsled tunnel. Oliver could see a glass-bottomed swimming pool filled with swimmers, another just for diving, all kinds of gymnastics and tumbling equipment, a running track, a high jump, ping-pong tables, and a skate park.

“It’s very important for Seers to be physically fit,” Ralph explained. “We all have to partake in physical activity every single day with Coach Finkle.”

Oliver grimaced. He was *not* sporty at all. None of the schools he’d attended in his normal life cared that he hated physical activity. He’d managed to go through his whole education avoiding it.

“Do we have to?” he asked.

“It’s one of the rules,” Ralph said, nodding. “It doesn’t matter what kind of activity you choose, hence all the options. You’ll find something you like and don’t mind doing. I promise you. You’ll surprise yourself.”

He smiled his breezy smile and they exited the atrium through the door they’d first entered. Back in the main foyer Ralph directed Oliver to a door with a large R on it.

“R stands for reward,” he explained.

He ushered Oliver through the door. Oliver gasped. He was

standing in another huge room, this one filled with candy-dispensing machines. They ran all the way around the room, like marble runs for candy. Oliver watched, his mouth open, as kids pushed buttons and watched their candy roll through the network of brightly colored tubes before being dispensed into their palms at the bottom.

“AWESOME!” Oliver cried. He looked over at Ralph. “What do you have to do to get candy?”

“Follow the rules,” Ralph told him. “There are a *lot* of rules.”

They left the amazing reward store and headed back out to the main atrium. Here, Oliver saw a door with a large L on it.

“What does L stand for?” he asked Ralph, feeling eager to look inside.

“L for library,” Ralph explained. He nodded his head in encouragement and Oliver went ahead to open the door.

Once again the room was just as big as the main atrium, the sports hall, and the candy reward store; fifty floors of books. Vast ladders connected all the shelves on all the floors, and students whizzed around on them, pushing themselves with ease around the place. Some people were even in harnesses, climbing like monkeys up the shelves then leaping off with their books in hand and floating back down to the ground. And right in the middle was a column of seating; a giant vertical, red leather couch unit, with different booths and armchairs at various points.

“Okay, this is definitely my kind of place,” Oliver said, astounded. “I love to read.”

“You’re not allowed to take any books out,” Ralph said. “It’s a rule. I’m not sure why, something to do with paradoxical texts exploding.” He chuckled. “Anyway, don’t stand there drooling, there’s plenty more to see.”

They went back out to the central atrium and headed toward more doors. The next door they reached was marked with an X.

“X?” Oliver said, racking his brains. “X for X-ray? Or xylophone?” He couldn’t really imagine the purpose of a room filled with xylophones but from what he’d seen of the place so far, he wouldn’t be surprised.

“X is for no entry,” Ralph said. “There are places the students aren’t allowed to go. Anywhere with an X on it.”

“Oh, okay,” Oliver said, feeling a little deflated by the answer. He’d been quite excited by the xylophone room. “Why?”

“It’s another one of the rules,” Ralph said. “Think of them like faculty rooms. You know, even teachers have lives.” He chuckled again.

His mention of teachers brought Oliver back to reality. He was here to learn, after all, not eat candy and play badminton. And as much as he was enjoying Ralph’s tour, he still had so many burning questions in his mind, about who he was, why he was here, how any of this existed at all.

“What are the teachers like?” he asked Ralph. “What do we even study?”

“We have three classes in our first year of training. Doctor Ziblatt teaches Sight, which is learning to look into the

future and past and cross-dimensionally. Mr. Lazzarato is our Transformation tutor, he's the one who teaches us how to use our powers to alter the fabric of reality. And then there's Coach Finkle, who teaches us how to be physically strong and powerful. We see them every single day, for two hours each."

It seemed like a lot of work, Oliver thought with a mix of excitement and trepidation. He liked hard work, especially when he knew it would all go toward developing his powers, but he was still nervous about it all. Everything was so overwhelming.

"What happens once you've completed your first year of study?" Oliver asked Ralph.

"You go into the second year. More classes, different tutors, a whole new schedule to follow. Which is very important, I have to stress." He gave Oliver a stern, almost bossy expression. "The timetable is meticulously planned in order to stop certain timelines collapsing in on themselves."

Oliver's head spun. He'd never felt such immense pressure. He hardly even knew the rules of the school and now he was expected to follow them rigidly so as not to create any time ripples! Everything seemed to possess the potential for causing a timeline to collapse, even the mere act of taking a book out of the library!

"You'll get the hang of it," Ralph said. "I'll be there to show you the ropes. Me and my friends. Everyone's really nice. Well, not everyone. In my group there's Walter, Simon, and Hazel. You'll like them, I promise. And Ichiro, too. He's in the second

year and hangs out with us sometimes. Just steer clear of Edmund and Vinnie.”

Oliver nodded, trying to take it all in. But Ralph was talking so quickly and giving him so much information, Oliver couldn't even begin to commit any of it to memory.

He pointed at the door with a Z. “What's this then? Does the School for Seers have its own zoo?”

Ralph laughed. “No. Although that would be great. Z is for zzz, as in sleeping. That's where the sleep pods are.”

“Sleep pods?” Oliver asked, curious. “Can I look?”

Ralph shook his head. “We all have allotted sleep times and we're not allowed to sleep outside of them. What with the whole school existing out of time thing, the sleeping area is in perpetual night. It's a very important...”

“...rule,” Oliver finished.

There were more rules to the School for Seers than he could really get his head around.

“Can I see someone using their powers?” Oliver asked Ralph. “I still don't really understand what I am, what anyone here is.”

“Your guide didn't explain?” Ralph asked, frowning.

“My guide?” Oliver asked, widening his eyes. “Isn't that you?”

Ralph laughed. “No, I mean your human guide in your timeline. You must have had one. A person who appeared when you needed them the most, who had answers to questions you'd never before found.”

“You mean... Armando?” Oliver asked. His heart felt like a

jagged rock when he remembered his dear friend dying in his arms.

“We each have one,” Ralph said. “A human who’s assigned to start us on our journey. They’re usually considered wacky by the rest of the world, because how could you not be once you know what we know!”

He laughed. Everything seemed so simple to Ralph, like it wasn’t some huge, crazy, mind-blowing thing. Oliver envied his laid-back nature a little.

“So Armando was supposed to guide me here?” Oliver muttered aloud. “That explains how he knew stuff about me. I guess he was killed before he had a chance to finish explaining it all.”

“He was killed?” Ralph asked sympathetically. “I’m so sorry.”

Oliver felt his tears welling in his eyes. He sniffed, not wanting to cry in front of Ralph.

“Don’t be sad,” Ralph told him. “I can fill in all the blanks. What do you need to know?”

Oliver pushed his sadness away. Finally, someone was really going to give him some answers. He felt embarrassed to admit his ignorance, since he was so used to being the smart one.

“Why don’t you start by telling me what a Seer actually is?”

Ralph pulled a face. “Oh. Okay. You really need me to start with the basics.”

Oliver blushed and shrugged.

“All right then,” Ralph began. “Let’s sit down. Get comfy. I’ll

start at the very beginning.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They returned to the library and sat together on one of the red leather couches. Ralph selected a book from the shelves and laid it open on the coffee table before them. It was weather-beaten with smudged, dog-eared pages reminding Oliver of his well-read inventors book.

“First things first,” Ralph said, turning to the opening page. “Forget everything you think you know about time. Time isn’t real. There’s no beginning and no end. Everything exists always.”

Oliver blinked. “That’s not a particularly easy concept to get my head around.”

“Here,” Ralph said, pointing at a passage of text. “This explains it better.”

Oliver read.

Time is simultaneous. Everything that will happen has already happened and is happening now as you read this passage.

Oliver rubbed his aching forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, I’m still a student myself,” Ralph said. “I may not be the best person to explain. But basically, for time travel to exist—which we both accept it does, since we’re sitting here in 1944—time can’t be real. ’Cause you can’t go somewhere that doesn’t exist, right?”

“Right...” Oliver nodded, uncertainly. “But if that’s the case, then everything must be fixed. In order for all time to exist and

all events to have already happened and be currently happening, nothing can change or it would create paradoxes.”

Ralph shook his head emphatically. “Not exactly. Because there’s an infinite number of timelines. The universe wants the main timeline to follow a certain route, the best route. In order to keep everyone on the right path, the universe imbues Seers with the power to change and alter the timeline, to tweak and realign it and get it back to the correct path. No one knows what we’ve done because everything rejumbles itself and that becomes the new reality. But Seers know. Unlike normal mortals who tend to forget conflicting realities, we can hold many different timelines in our heads.” He beamed with excitement. “Although it can get confusing to hold on to many different timelines and threads. That’s why Seers take Rewritten History classes for most of their lives.”

Oliver frowned. His mind was spinning, his head pounding from trying to understand it all. “So we’re just pawns of the universe?”

Ralph blinked. He looked a little hurt. When he spoke again his tone was softer, his enthusiasm toned down. “Our powers are a gift from the universe. She chose us to do this. We’re part of the very fabric and essence of what makes reality real. I personally think that is really, really cool.”

Oliver looked up into Ralph’s earnest green eyes. He felt bad for feeling so overwhelmed that he couldn’t share in Ralph’s evident excitement.

“Why don’t you tell me a bit more about our powers?” he suggested.

Ralph brightened again immediately, clearly eager to oblige. “So, we each have a specialism that allows us to manipulate the physical world in order to change the future. I have a biological specialism. I can rearrange matter; make vines grow to tie someone up, or part the trees of a forest to open a pathway through. That’s how I was able to change the leaf before. It’s not a lot but once I’ve trained properly I’ll be strong. Right now I can just about make a petal fall off a buttercup.”

“What about the others?” Oliver asked. “What kind of rearranging can they do?”

“Well, my friend Simon has a molecular specialism,” Ralph explained. “Liquids to gas, lead to gold, that kind of thing. Hazel has a chemical specialism. She can change someone’s mood from happy to sad, for example. She once helped me digest a rather large burrito. So, I suppose if you want to see your role as some kind of predetermined burden you can. Or you can choose to see it as AWESOME like I do.”

“All right, all right,” Oliver said, relenting. “That bit does seem pretty awesome. Messing with molecules and atoms and the fabric of reality is pretty cool. But how does it actually work?”

“You have to look into the future,” Ralph explained, “and picture what you need. Then you work out which part of the manipulation will achieve it. So say I want to make a mountain grow, I’d have to visualize the future, where the mountain is

already grown, and manipulate the necessary parts to achieve it. Any idea what your specialism is?"

Oliver racked his brains. So far he'd only used his to break a table leg and open some steel doors.

"Is there a specialism for manipulating materials?" he asked. "Like wood and steel?"

Ralph looked a little blank. "Not sure. I mean, an atomic specialism would be able to. It's by far the most powerful but by far the hardest to master. It's also super rare..." His voice trailed off and his eyes suddenly widened. Oliver saw a spark ignite behind them. "Unless you're the one we've been waiting for!"

"What do you mean?" Oliver asked.

Ralph looked suddenly excited. "We're waiting for someone. Someone very special, who will be the most powerful Seer of all. Every time a new kid arrives we think it's them but they always end up disappointing us."

Oliver gulped. "You don't think it could be me?"

Ralph shrugged. "Only time will tell." Then he stood suddenly and tapped his stomach. "I'm famished. Let's go and have dinner."

Oliver stood, too, glancing back at the heavy tome that contained all the theories of space-time he'd discussed with Ralph. He knew he would be back to read it as soon as possible. He needed to go through it all with a fine-tooth comb. Its theories had expanded his mind far beyond Einstein's theory of relativity.

But for now, Oliver had to accept his rumbling stomach

needed to take precedence.

They left through the L door, and Ralph led him to a door with an F on it. F for food, Oliver presumed.

Ralph pushed open the doors and before Oliver's eyes was the most magnificent dining room he had ever seen.

It was just like the other rooms, a huge open space of fifty floors. There were brightly colored tubes crisscrossing all over the place, with conveyor belts inside and small plates of food moving along them. It was like a sushi bar in 3D technicolor.

In the center was a huge concrete column with round glass tables surrounding it at various heights. Oliver watched as kids walked over, sat down and clipped themselves in with seat belts. When the last chair was taken, the table started to rise into the air. The column was some kind of elevator system. Once the glass table reached its position, twenty floors up, it clicked into place. Oliver saw the kids upon it reaching for plates of food from the conveyor belts that were now within reach, chatting happily with each other.

Oliver couldn't believe what he was seeing. Like everything else in the school he'd seen so far, even eating was a hurried affair.

"This is insane," he said aloud.

"Come on," Ralph said, pulling him by the collar. "Let's get a seat quickly or we'll have to wait for the next table."

Oliver was tugged along to the column just as the next communal table rose up through a hole in the ground and clicked

into place. Kids dashed into seats around him. At the same time Ralph shoved him down into one of the chairs.

“Clip in,” he said.

Oliver scrambled to find his straps. It was very fiddly trying to get them to click in place, and the other seats were filling up with kids fast.

Just at the last second, Oliver managed to get his buckle fastened. Then suddenly he was shooting upward.

Oliver gripped the side of the table to steady himself. He made the mistake of looking down and, through the glass tabletop, saw his legs dangling above the ground, which was shrinking rapidly out of sight.

Then the table stopped abruptly. Oliver’s stomach flipped from the sudden sensation of deceleration.

“All right?” Ralph asked.

“I think so,” Oliver replied, blowing his messy hair from his eyes.

The sound of mechanical whirring caught Oliver’s attention and he looked around as hundreds of different-colored tubes moved toward the table. With a whoosh, different plates started flying before him; bowls of fuchsia pink rice, plates of rainbow-colored hamburgers, a dish filled with sparkly broccoli.

“What the...” Oliver muttered.

He looked over at Ralph, who was busy selecting dishes, licking his lips greedily. He already had three plates; a sausage roll with marble pastry, curly alphabet fries, and veggies shaped

like dinosaurs. Oliver quickly grabbed the next dish that came his way. He was pleasantly relieved to see it was a standard slice of pepperoni pizza. He took a greedy bite. It was excellent.

As the initial burst of intensity subsided, Oliver got a chance to look at the others sitting at the table with him for the first time; a girl with two neat braids coiled on her head, the color of butterscotch, a dark-skinned boy with a short curly Afro, and a very pale boy with wide-set blue eyes and hair so fair it was nearly silver.

“You’re new,” the girl said when their eyes met. Hers were gray, turned a little down at the edges in a way that made her look slightly mournful.

“How can you tell?” Oliver asked.

“You look startled,” she teased. “That’s how everyone looks when they first see the dining hall. Plus, you’ve only selected one thing.”

Oliver looked at her own choices: blue mashed potatoes, red peas, and a huge sausage in the shape of an airplane. Her drink looked like an Oreo milkshake. Oliver licked his lips.

“That’s Hazel,” Ralph said, gesturing to the girl. “This is Oliver, the boy Professor Amethyst sent me to collect.”

Hazel slid her milkshake across to him. “Here. I saw you looking. You’ve got to be fast sometimes in order to get what you want.”

“Thanks,” Oliver replied. “I’m not used to so much choice.” He blushed as he remembered his meager past and the poverty

he'd come from. "We didn't have food like this at home."

"I'd be more surprised if you did," Hazel said with a kind chuckle.

Just then the dark-skinned boy beside her leaned over and took a forkful of her potatoes. He grinned devilishly as he shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

"Walter!" Ralph scolded from the other side. He folded his arms. "Get your own."

Walter didn't look fazed by his admonishment. He just kept on grinning. Oliver got the distinct impression that, as the oldest, Ralph sometimes took on a teacherly role. Perhaps it was more of a parent role, since none of the kids here had access to their families. Oliver wondered if they were ever lonely. He himself didn't like his family and was relieved not to have to interact with them anymore. But a lot of kids got on well with their parents and siblings. It must be harder for them being here alone. They must get homesick.

"So, new kid?" Walter, the boy with an Afro and a mouthful of Hazel's stolen mashed potato said to Oliver. "How are you coping?"

"It's a lot to take in," Oliver confessed, thinking back to his conversation with Ralph in the library. "It's very different from what I'm used to."

"When are you from?" Walter asked.

When, Oliver noted. *Not where*. He wasn't even sure how best to describe it.

“The third millennium?” he tried.

“Not too distant then,” Walter replied. “I’m from 1982. Hazel’s from the fourth millennium—3032.”

Oliver’s eyes widened as he snapped his head up to face her. Hazel blushed.

“I know,” she said. “It’s sooo cringe.”

Oliver had no idea why such a thing would be cringey. All he could think about was how utterly wild this all was. Hazel was from the future!

“Is there anyone here from the past?” Oliver asked.

Ralph looked up then and chuckled. “It depends when your reference point is. Walter’s from the past for you. You’re from the past for me.”

“When are you from then?” Oliver asked him. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Ralph might be from a completely different point in time than him.

“I was born in 4040,” Ralph said. “Fifth millennium.” He grinned, like this was something to be very proud of. He looked at the pale boy beside him. “When are you from, Simon? I always forget.”

“1890,” the boy said in a very plummy British accent.

Oliver could hardly believe what he was hearing. A school suspended in time, filled with kids from all different eras. His mind spun.

“Have you met any teachers yet?” Hazel asked, changing the subject. She helped herself to a bowl of popcorn.

Oliver shook his head. “I haven’t seen a single adult since I got here.”

Hazel giggled. “It takes a little getting used to. The adults trust us to behave, to follow our schedules and do our work. We get a lot of freedom.”

“As long as we follow the rules,” Ralph added.

“The only grown-ups you’ll see here are your teachers,” Hazel added, chewing on her popcorn. “Oh, and the occasional hologram chat check-in with your guide.”

At the mention of his guide, Oliver dropped his eyes to his plate. That pit of pain that always accompanied his thoughts about Armando opened up again.

Ralph shot Hazel a warning look across the table.

“Did I say something wrong?” Hazel asked with a concerned yet quizzical air.

Oliver shook his head. “No. It’s just that my guide passed away.”

All the kids around the table exchanged glances.

“I’m so sorry,” Hazel said gently.

“Terrible luck, chum,” Simon said, shaking his head sadly.

“Totally bogus,” Walter added.

Oliver paused. He tried to swallow the hard lump in his throat.

Ralph came to the rescue. “Oliver’s guide died before he could tell him what he really is or why he was supposed to come here. We have to be extra sensitive, okay? Try not to overwhelm him. We don’t want his head to explode.”

Oliver felt grateful to have Ralph looking out for him, even if the closest his head had come to exploding since he'd gotten here had been because of Ralph's explanation of time.

Hazel reached over and patted his hand. "Losing your guide must have been very hard. But you're going to have a lot of fun here, I promise you. You couldn't be in a better place."

Walter grinned then. "You've seen the S hall, right? Isn't it amazing?"

"Sure," Oliver said, shrugging morosely.

"We should play a game of switchit after we've eaten," Walter suggested.

"It's such a vulgar game," Simon scoffed. "I much prefer cricket. It's far more refined."

"But switchit is awesome!" Walter exclaimed. "I'm obsessed. It's like basketball but with lots of hoops. And you fly on ostreagles."

"What's an ostreagle?" Oliver asked.

"They're an animal from the year three thousand," Hazel explained. "A genetic splicing between an ostrich and an eagle."

"Right. Got it," Oliver said, feeling exceptionally out of his depth.

Ralph spoke in his paternal way again. "Walter, there's no time for switchit before bed for us first-years, you know that."

Walter rolled his eyes and went back to eating.

Overwhelmed by everything, Oliver turned his gaze back down to his plate, picking at the pepperoni. As he did so, he

realized someone below him was looking up.

She was a very pretty girl, with emerald green eyes and straight black hair. She smiled at him shyly and then looked back down at her own food.

“That’s Esther,” Hazel said. “All the boys love her.” She said it very theatrically, letting out a little scoff from the back of her throat.

Oliver thought she looked utterly charming. He wanted to ask more about the beautiful girl but Hazel’s attitude seemed to suggest it was a sore topic, for her at least. She seemed jealous of Esther, even though she herself was very pretty, with her gray eyes and butterscotch hair. Oliver could imagine Hazel being the subject of many a boy’s crush; it just so happened that he himself was drawn to the ethereal beauty of Esther.

Suddenly a mechanized arm appeared and collected all the plates, bowls, and cups off the table, right from under their noses. Oliver’s unfinished pizza was whisked away. He reached for it with futility.

The table began to quickly descend, plummeting to the ground—a most unpleasant experience after having just eaten. Once they reached the ground, Ralph instantly unclipped himself and came up to Oliver.

“We’d better get to bed,” he said. “It’s our allotted slot.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ralph directed Oliver out of the atrium. It was just as busy as usual with students. Filing out of the Z room looking fresh and eager to begin their lessons were a bunch of kids who looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Oliver presumed they were in the years above.

The small group Oliver had shared dinner with walked around the huge kapok tree, heading for the door marked Z. There were other kids congregating outside and they looked up at Oliver with suspicious glances as he and his gang approached.

“Ugh,” Hazel said. “That’s Edmund. Whatever he says, just ignore him.”

But as soon as they reached the door, Edmund turned around and sneered.

“Another new kid,” he said loudly to his friend who had an equally sneering expression. “We’ve already had a ton of kids who are supposedly the most important, powerful Seer of all time and none of them have turned out to be. I’m pretty certain you’re not the one we’ve all been waiting for.” He smirked nastily over his shoulder and addressed Oliver directly. “You don’t look like much to me.”

“Shove off, Edmund,” Ralph said between his teeth.

He put his arm around Oliver protectively and led him some distance away from Edmund. As they walked, Edmund called

out, "I bet you're a cobalt!"

"A cobalt?" Oliver asked, looking up at Ralph, who was hurrying him along out of earshot. "Is that some kind of insult from the future?"

He lamented the fact that there were bullies everywhere, from school, to the factory, to here, this magical place located in between time. At least he didn't understand their taunts here.

"Just ignore him," Ralph said.

But Oliver couldn't help but note the troubled look on his face. Something Edmund had said had rattled him. Oliver got the distinct impression Ralph wasn't telling him something.

"What did he mean?" Oliver asked. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Ralph remained silent, his gaze fixed on Edmund and the rest of the kids crowded by the Z door. The Z in the door turned white and everyone around them began filing inside but Ralph held back until Edmund was gone.

"Come on, let's go inside," he said.

Oliver followed alongside him. "Can you please answer my question, Ralph?" he asked. "Is there something you haven't told me about?"

They stepped inside the Z room. It was like some kind of airlock. It was quite dark, save for rows of glowing white, circular doors, like the lockers in a changing room.

Once again, Ralph didn't answer Oliver's pleas.

"Grab your sleep suit from there," he said, opening up a pod.

It hissed and white steam coiled out.

Still confused, Oliver reached inside and pulled out a strange white suit. It looked like a kid's blanket sleeper. "I have to sleep in this?"

Ralph just nodded. "The changing rooms are that way." He gestured to a row of white curtains.

"Thanks," Oliver mumbled.

He couldn't understand Ralph's sudden change in demeanor. Either *cobalt* was a deeply offensive term, or it meant something else entirely that Ralph wasn't willing to tell him.

He hurried behind the curtains and quickly changed, wanting to get back out and interrogate Ralph some more. The strange white sleeper felt very cool against his skin, more like he'd put on a suit of air rather than fabric. He hurried back out with his clothes bundled in his arms.

"Put those in the pod," Ralph said immediately, shoving Oliver's clothes into the now empty pod he'd taken the suit from. "They'll be cleaned for you while you sleep."

The sleeping process at this school was just as baffling as the eating one had been, Oliver thought. But more baffling than all was Ralph hurrying him along.

"Ready?" he asked, sounding impatient.

Oliver nodded. "Yes, but Ralph, can you please explain why Edmund's rattled you so much?"

He could see the sneering bully standing with the rest of the kids, dressed for bed in matching white sleepsuits.

“It’s nothing,” Ralph said.

The next door opened and everyone started to file out.

“It’s clearly not nothing...” Oliver began, following the others.

But his words died in his throat when he saw the sleeping dorms. Like the other specialized areas, this one was a huge fifty-floor atrium, with strange glass pods attached to the walls and a central column. It was very dark, save for the white glow of each pod, and some small glittering snowflake lights that fell endlessly through the air.

“How does that work...?” he murmured, transfixed by the snowflakes.

He looked over and saw that Ralph had already joined the queue. He snapped back to attention and hurried after him. He wasn’t about to drop this one.

At the front was an older Japanese boy who was directing each kid into a pod. It was a smooth process, done with almost military precision. The pod would whiz into place, the boy would push a button to open the lid, the kid would climb in, and then the boy would push the button again, the lid would close, the pod whiz away and everyone in the queue would take a step forward.

Edmund was right at the front of the queue. He turned, clearly searching for someone. When his gaze found Oliver’s he called out, “Hope you get a good sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day for you!” Then he got into his pod and whooshed away.

Oliver turned immediately to Ralph.

“A big day?” he demanded. “What is he talking about?”

He was starting to feel panicked now. This was more than a random insult he didn't understand. Ralph was definitely keeping something from him.

Hazel, who was standing just ahead of them, jumped in. "He just means your first classes," she said, hurriedly. "You know, new teachers, new kids, that sort of thing. He's just being mean."

Though Oliver was, indeed, very anxious about the new classes and all the new people he'd meet tomorrow, he could tell by the tense atmosphere passing between Ralph and Hazel that there was more.

"Please," he begged. "What is happening tomorrow?"

As more kids got into their pods and whooshed away, they inched closer to the front. Oliver saw Simon, the pale Victorian boy, climb into a pod and whoosh into the ether. Then Walter with the dark skin and short Afro went next. It would be his turn soon. He couldn't get in without knowing what fate awaited him.

Finally, Ralph sighed. "You're going to be tested," he said.

Oliver gulped. "Tested? In what way?"

"It's fine," Hazel said, jumping in again to try and reassure him, to diffuse the tension. "You'll pass no problems."

But her words made Oliver even more tense.

"It's a test I have to *pass*?" Oliver asked. "What happens if I don't?"

Ralph's expression was even more grim than before. He looked at Hazel with grief. Edmund had clearly brought this up to rattle Oliver, and now Ralph would have to clean up the mess.

"It's to find out what specialism you have," Ralph explained.

"Okay..." Oliver said. He could tell there was more to come.

"But..." Ralph added.

Oliver swallowed hard.

"There is a small chance that you won't pass at all. Professor Amethyst doesn't always get it right."

Oliver felt a jolt like lightning strike him in the chest. "You mean I might find out I'm not a Seer after all?"

Ralph shook his head. "You're a Seer, all right, Oliver. It's just whether you're a bromine Seer or a cobalt one."

"I don't understand," Oliver stammered. "Bromine and cobalt are elements. What does that mean?"

"They're the two different types of Seer," Ralph explained, sounding increasingly worried that he was giving Oliver too much information. "Bromine is red and cobalt is blue."

Oliver was suspicious. "If it's just a case of finding out whether I'm red or blue then why have you gone as white as a sheet?"

"Because cobalt Seers usually turn to the other side," Ralph blurted. "They use their powers for bad."

The news hit Oliver like a freight train. His heart started to hammer wildly. Feeling dizzy with shock, he staggered and held an arm out to steady himself. Hazel appeared beside him, gently supporting him by the elbow with a concerned expression on her face.

"You'll be okay," she assured him. "Even if you are a cobalt Seer, it doesn't mean you have to leave or anything. You'll still

have a place here. It just means you'll have to be very careful with your powers. You'll have to learn to resist the lure of evil."

The next pod arrived for Hazel. It flew her into the blackness as well. Then, suddenly, it was Oliver's turn. A pod was flying into position for him.

"We've said too much," Ralph said, looking concerned. "Come on. Get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

"I can't sleep now," Oliver protested. "What if I turn out to be a cobalt tomorrow?"

He glanced at Ralph's face. He looked drawn and worried. The huge pit of anguish in Oliver's stomach grew deeper.

He turned back to the front, to the older Japanese boy peering at him.

"You're new," the boy stated. "I'm Ichiro, the residential assistant, or RA. I can help you while you're here. In you get."

But Oliver wasn't able to move at all. He was practically hyperventilating. All this time he'd been wondering about his powers it had never occurred to him that they might be something bad, something dark and evil. It was too much to take in.

"He's a bit daunted," Ralph said on his behalf.

"Everyone is first time," Ichiro assured him.

He clicked the button to open the pod lid and Oliver got his first glimpse inside. It looked like a coffin.

Ichiro spoke. "Once you're in you connect the white probes to your temples, press the sticky heart-shaped pad to your chest, put your finger into the pulse clip, lie back, and press the white

button.”

His words were very fast, too fast for Oliver’s already befuddled mind to follow.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver stammered. “I do what with the sticky pad...?”

But there was no time. Ralph was gently pushing him from behind into the pod.

“You’ll be fine,” Ichiro said, as he shoved Oliver down into sitting in the pod. “Just don’t press the red button, okay?”

Oliver felt panicked as he slid into the pod. He could see Ichiro standing on one side above him, and Ralph on the other, wearing his expression of concern. Maybe Ralph had been right to try and hide the test from him. Knowing had just made him more nervous. He’d never sleep now.

Ichiro slammed his palm onto a button and a frosted glass lid closed on him. He was really trapped now.

Panicking, Oliver felt the pod lurch upward. He grabbed the sides, feeling like he was on the most unstable rollercoaster in the world.

He looked around for the wires and things he was supposed to attach to himself but it was as disorientating as being in the trash can in the storm had been. Besides, his head was spinning with everything he’d been through that day, with all the rules and things he needed to remember, with anxiety for what was to come.

The pod stopped moving suddenly and everything went quiet.

Oliver lay there, staring up at the frosted glass, breathing rapidly. He took a moment, then began to run through in his head the steps he was supposed to follow.

He found a bundle of wires. Amongst them was a heart-shaped sticky pad, which he placed to his chest. Then he found a small white clip the shape and size of his finger, and slid his index finger inside. Then finally he found two pads which must be the ones to put on his temples. Then he lay back, his heart thrumming.

Above him were three buttons. One white. One red. One blue.

Red or blue. Bromine or cobalt. Good or evil. Tomorrow he would find out what type of Seer he was, what specialism he really had. He would finally find answers to his questions, answers he may wish he'd never learned.

Oliver took a deep breath. There was no turning back now. With a mixture of nerves and dread, he reached forward and pressed the white button. And in an instant, he was asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“How was your first sleep in the pod?”

Oliver blinked with confusion. He looked up into the face of Ichiro, the boy who just moments earlier—or at least that’s how it felt to Oliver—had shoved him into the sleep pod in which he was currently lying. Behind Ichiro, the sky was no longer sparkling stars in a blanket of black but soft warm daylight, like an early spring morning.

In a flurry of surprise, Oliver sat up. He rubbed his eyes. He felt disorientated and quickly pulled the sticky tabs from his skin. “It’s morning? But it feels like no time has passed at all.”

Ichiro chuckled. “There’s no morning or night here. It’s all synthetic, all manipulated. But if it makes you feel less weird, then sure, it’s morning. As for whether any time has passed or not...”

Oliver held a hand up to stop Ichiro in his tracks. Ralph had given him enough of a headache talking about the nonexistence of time yesterday. The last thing he needed was a debate first thing after waking up.

Instead, he took Ichiro’s outstretched hand and got to his feet.

But as Oliver stood, his memories suddenly came back to him. With a jolt of fear, he remembered that today—his first full day of lessons—would involve the dreaded test. What if it turned out he was a cobalt Seer with the potential to turn his powers to evil?

Ichiro must have noticed the change in Oliver's expression.

"Interdimensional sleep can feel a bit weird at first," he said reassuringly. "But you'll get used to it."

"It's not that," Oliver muttered. "Today is my test."

"You get to find out your specialism?" Ichiro asked. "What are you thinking—electrical? Or maybe elemental like me? That'd be great. I'd love another elemental buddy."

"Not that part of the test," Oliver refuted. "The part about whether I'm bromine or cobalt. Good or..." He lowered his voice to a whisper, "evil."

Ichiro pulled a face. "I'm sick of those binary comparisons. Cobalt Seers can be good! Bromine Seers can turn bad. It's the equivalent of saying every sociopath is evil. It's reductive and not true at all. You're a good kid, Oliver. There's no reason you'd go bad, cobalt, bromine, or otherwise."

Oliver felt greatly reassured by his words. "You really mean that?" he asked Ichiro. "It's really not that big a deal?"

"Not at all," Ichiro told him. "And I should know. *I'm* cobalt."

Oliver was surprised by the admission. Clearly, it wasn't so bad after all. Ichiro seemed nothing but kind and reassuring, and he hadn't been kicked out by Professor Amethyst either. Oliver had been worrying about nothing.

"Your clothes will be in the airlock," Ichiro added, patting Oliver's shoulder. "Cleaned and ready for you. Enjoy your day!"

Oliver felt very relieved. The thought of being tested no longer filled him with dread. In fact, without that anxiety occupying his

mind, he suddenly became eager to learn more about his powers and how to harness them.

He went to where Ichiro had pointed, the same changing-room area from last night, and wondered who else would be inside. He hoped to see Ralph and Hazel, and Walter and Simon. And the beautiful Esther. But not Edmund or his horrible scowling friend, Vinnie.

Oliver entered the airlock changing room and was relieved to find Ralph and Hazel the only people inside. Hazel had already braided her hair into the same two-bun style she'd worn yesterday.

“Feeling rested?” Ralph asked.

“I got your clothes for you,” Hazel said, handing Oliver his blue overalls, cleaned and smelling of fresh lavender. “Oh, and this was with them.”

She held out a small rectangle of hard transparent plastic.

“Your timetable,” she explained.

Oliver took the piece of plastic and it suddenly whirred. Lights appeared on the surface. They arranged themselves into times and coordinates.

“It’s everywhere you need to be and when,” Hazel told him.

“Does it show me when my test will be?” Oliver asked.

Hazel pointed to a series of digits and numbers. It was right after all his classes for the day. She gave him a gentle smile. “I promise you it won’t be that bad.”

Oliver took the bundle of clothes from her arms. “I know,” he

said as he walked over to the changing area. “Ichiro told me that the test isn’t that big a deal.” He closed the curtain and started to change, calling out as he did so. “If he’s a cobalt then it can’t be that bad.” It felt nice to be out of the strange white sleeper. His overalls were the only familiar thing in his life right now and so wearing the factory garments from Armando’s factory made him feel secure. “You could’ve been a bit more reassuring. You made the test seem very dramatic! But if Ichiro is anything to go by, it doesn’t make that much of a difference whether I’m cobalt or bromine.”

He remembered then that Ichiro’s exact words had been *cobalt, bromine, or otherwise*. He wondered if it was a figure of speech, or whether there might be more categories of Seer to belong to.

Oliver put his timetable in his overalls pocket and walked out from behind the curtain. He saw Ralph and Hazel were still there, but the room was also now full of a ton of other kids. Amongst them were Edmund and his mean friend. They’d all overheard him. Edmund sneered at him.

“Did you hear that, Vinnie?” he said to his friend. “Apparently it doesn’t make a difference what type of Seer you are.”

Vinnie began to cackle.

Then Edmund called out to Oliver, “Just keep telling yourself that when your test shows you’re cobalt!”

Oliver felt his cheeks burn. He pushed past Edmund and Vinnie and stood beside Ralph and Hazel, silently wishing they’d

told him to stop rambling aloud from behind the curtain. He had not intended to put himself in Edmund's firing line so soon after waking up.

Just then, Walter emerged from behind the curtain in sneakers and a shirt with a cartoon character on. He came and joined them.

"Can't wait for switchit practice today." He grinned and slapped Oliver on the back. "Sleep okay?"

"Yes. Fine," Oliver said tensely.

Simon joined them in his strange Victorian fashion, looking every inch the smart English gentleman. "Tally-ho," he said.

Just then the airlock doors opened and everyone filed out, in their usual hurried manner. Oliver was swept along with the crowd.

A whole host of emotions roiled inside him as he followed everyone to the F hall for breakfast on the levitating table. He clipped himself in next to Hazel, prepared this time for the sudden sensation of elevation. He also knew to be quick and grabbed himself an oval-shaped banana and a stack of neon pancakes. But as he reached for a glass of green orange juice, his gaze went through the glass table to the one beneath him. There, Edmund was sitting with Vinnie. They both glared up at him. Oliver quickly broke eye contact.

"Are you all right, Oliver?" Hazel asked. She sounded concerned. "It's not still the test, is it? I did *try* to tell you it wasn't a big deal."

“It’s not that,” Oliver replied. “It’s Edmund. I’m sick of bullies. I thought here of all places I wouldn’t get picked on.”

Hazel looked at him sympathetically. “Try to ignore Edmund. I know it’s hard. I was bullied at my old school too.”

“You were?” Oliver asked, feeling his friendly connection with Hazel deepening.

She nodded, empathetic for his plight. “Being a Seer makes you different, even when your powers aren’t showing yet. I guess we’re smarter than the average kid and it makes us stick out.”

From the other side of Oliver, Ralph suddenly piped up. “I’m not smarter.” He laughed and pointed at himself with both his thumbs. “Worst Seer the school’s ever seen, according to Doctor Zibblatt.”

At the mention of their teacher, Oliver remembered it would soon be time for lessons, for learning. He felt himself tremble with nervous anticipation.

Once breakfast was eaten, the robot arms cleared their plates and the table descended. They left the F hall and went into the main atrium. It was even busier than it had been yesterday with students everywhere, whizzing around on the myriad walkways above.

Ralph led the way to the elevator; thanks to his height, he had a larger stride than the others. He also seemed to enjoy being a leader, which was fine with Oliver because right now all he wanted to do was follow.

Everyone squeezed inside—Oliver, Walter, Hazel, Simon,

and Ralph. Though he'd only known them for a short while, Oliver felt like he'd found kindred spirits. They were from different points in history but were bonded by their powers. He felt closer to them than he ever had to anyone before. For the first time in his life, Oliver felt as though he'd found some friends.

They whooshed upward. Then the doors to the elevator opened and Ralph directed everyone along a walkway. They stopped outside a door. Then, for the first time since arriving at the School for Seers, Oliver went into a classroom.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but he should have known it wouldn't be like your typical classroom. Instead, it was a domed room, with the seats in a horseshoe around the edges. In the middle was a sort of stage, with a raised platform. And there stood a woman in a white lab coat. She immediately reminded Oliver of Ms. Belfry, with her chestnut brown hair and warm smile. He wondered how Ms. Belfry was doing, back at Campbell Junior High.

"Doctor Ziblatt is a wonderful tutor," Simon said to Oliver. "She's the most intelligent person one could ever have the pleasure of knowing."

They took their seats and Oliver noticed Esther sitting just a few rows ahead. She had a very poised demeanor, Oliver thought, as though she was aware that she drew the attention of every boy in the room.

"Oh," Ralph said, leaning over from beside him. "You should strap in."

“What?” Oliver asked. “Why?”

He noticed black straps hanging either side of him and quickly clipped in. No sooner had he done so than the whole room started to spin. Oliver clutched the edge of the bench, feeling his neon pancakes swirling in his stomach and regretting now the speed with which he'd eaten them.

“What’s happening?” he said.

But when he looked over, Walter, Simon, Ralph, and Hazel were just blurs beside him. In fact, the whole room was a blur!

Then at last, everything came back into focus, in crystal, pinpoint precision.

“You okay?” Ralph asked, looking over at Oliver. He grinned widely.

Oliver blinked several times. “I think so. What just happened?”

“Centrifugal motion,” Hazel explained. “It helps us tap into our powers more easily. But of course you have to get to the point where you don’t feel like you’re spinning anymore, which is very fast. It’s never fun to get there, but once you are it’s fine.”

“So we’re still spinning now?” Oliver asked, surprised.

“Yeah!” Walter exclaimed enthusiastically. “Cool, huh?”

Just then, Doctor Ziblatt addressed the class. “Today we’re going to resume our studies on dimensional vision. Could someone remind the rest of the class what that is?”

To Oliver’s shock, almost every single hand shot into the air. The School for Seers was very different from Campbell Junior

High, he realized; the students actually wanted to learn. Even though Edmund and Vinnie had taken a disliking to him, at least he wouldn't have to deal with being called a freak or a nerd in this place.

Doctor Ziblatt scanned the students with their raised hands. "Miss Valentini," she said, pointing at Esther.

Oliver watched with rapt attention as the beautiful Esther stood, her black hair glistening under the lights.

"Dimensional vision is the ability to see through your current dimensional plane into the next," she said.

Her voice was like a piano, or a harp, making the most wonderful music. Oliver's heart skipped a beat.

"Thank you," Doctor Ziblatt said. "So if we were to think of dimensions like layers of glass lying on top of one another, each dimension runs parallel to the next, on and on, ad infinitum. As a Seer, it's important to be able to see through into all these different dimensions, because the information within them can be vital when making your decisions within this dimension. Each moment in time of every dimension can be accessed by a Seer, once they've trained hard enough."

Oliver felt a sudden surge of excitement at the thought of being able to see into different dimensions and timelines. What a wonderful thing to experience! Finally he could see things the way Ralph did. But he had so many questions.

"Does that mean we can look into the past?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes," Doctor Ziblatt said. "With enough hard work and

training.”

“So I could go and watch the dinosaurs?”

“Yes,” Doctor Ziblatt confirmed. “And travel there as well after much more studying.”

“Travel there?” Oliver asked, breathless with wonder.

He saw the corners of Doctor Ziblatt’s lips turn upward. “You must be new here,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Oliver Blue.”

Usually, Oliver would feel intimidated talking in front of so many people but he didn’t feel that way at the School for Seers. He felt like he belonged here.

“Mr. Blue,” Doctor Ziblatt said. “Come to the front and we’ll see whether we can get you looking into the next dimension.”

Oliver leapt up immediately. Though he was nervous, it was more with an excited sense of anticipation rather than fear. He hurried down the steps to the front of the class and up to Doctor Ziblatt.

She shook his hand. “The rest of the class have all completed this exercise,” she explained. “But I want to see what your baseline is.”

She handed him some goggles. Oliver took them, thinking immediately of the goggles Armando had given him back in the factory. They certainly looked very similar, except there were two electrodes attached to the side, a bit like the pads Oliver had had to attach to his head in his sleep pod. Doctor Ziblatt pressed them to his temples and, behind her, a large holographic image

appeared of the view through Oliver's eyes.

"That's what I'm seeing!" Oliver said with a gasp.

"It is indeed," Doctor Ziblatt said. "Now, this button here will help your eyes to unfocus on this dimension. Think of these as training wheels on a bicycle. Eventually, you'll be able to do this without them, but for now they will guide you."

She clicked the button and immediately Oliver's vision blurred. The image behind him blurred in unison.

"This is the state your mind must be in to begin to penetrate the layers of dimensions," Doctor Ziblatt explained. "You must be able to look past this world and into the next."

"You make it sound so easy," Oliver said, and to his surprise the class started to giggle.

He looked over at the blur of faces, and somehow through them all he was able to focus on Esther laughing at his joke. She looked even prettier when she was smiling, her usually serious demeanor lightening momentarily. His gaze lingered on her.

Suddenly, he heard a smattering of laughter.

"Someone's got a crush!" Vinnie shouted loudly.

Oliver realized, with dismay, that the image of Esther was reflected back in huge holographic precision behind him. His face turned hot and flushed red. He quickly looked away, his vision clouding over again.

"Settle down," Doctor Ziblatt told the class in a sharp tone.

The hubbub died down, and Oliver watched through misty eyes as Doctor Ziblatt took something from her drawer. It looked

like a very large, shiny piece of white cardboard. Right in the center was a black dot.

“More training wheels?” Oliver asked.

“This will help you focus on a point,” she confirmed. “And then, hopefully, *through* that point and beyond into the next plane.”

Oliver nodded. He was determined to do this. It was so exciting!

He searched the white card, his blurred vision struggling to focus on the black spot. Then he gritted his teeth. It felt like every ounce of his body was needed for this one task, even using the gizmos that were meant to take the hard work out!

But finally the fuzzy shape started to sharpen in his mind. The dot became a stark black shape against the contrasting white background. Then it began to change color, from black to red then to blue. The flashing colors made Oliver feel suddenly very sick.

“What’s happening?” Oliver asked, feeling a little panicked.

“Your mind is attempting to look through the dimensional layer,” Doctor Ziblatt explained. “It is a very unusual experience, especially the first time. Human brains aren’t exactly designed for this kind of work.”

Oliver’s heart started beating very fast. His palms started sweating. He reached up and tugged at the collar of his shirt. He could feel perspiration running down his neck.

Suddenly, he could take it no longer. He dropped the card on

the table and tore off the goggles. He grabbed the table to steady himself, fighting back the urge to dry heave.

“Haha!” he heard Edmund’s sneering voice. “Oliver can’t even do it with the goggles!”

“Mr. Branner,” Doctor Ziblatt snapped.

As Oliver gasped for breath, he felt Doctor Ziblatt rest a gentle hand on his back. “Perhaps you ought to see the nurse?”

“No, no nurse,” Oliver stammered. He was embarrassed enough as it was. He’d never live down having to go to the medical room on his first attempt to access his powers. “I’m fine.”

He stood, his head swimming, his stomach swirling. He felt his legs weaken beneath him. Doctor Ziblatt gripped him by his elbow.

“Mr. Black,” she said over his head. “Can you help Mr. Blue back to his seat?”

As Oliver’s vision started to come back to him, he saw Ralph hurrying toward him. But Oliver’s gaze went past Ralph to Esther; his attention seemed drawn to her. She was looking down, averting her gaze. She must be deeply embarrassed on his behalf by his failure. It only made Oliver feel worse.

Ralph reached him then, scooping an arm around his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Ollie. Everyone struggles to begin with.”

Oliver tried to take comfort in his words. But the background noises of Edmund and his friends giggling seemed to drown them out.

“Mr. Black is right,” Doctor Ziblatt added. “Everyone struggles.” Then, as she turned away, she muttered in a voice she must have assumed was too quiet for Oliver to hear, “I guess he’s not the special one we’ve all been waiting for after all.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Doctor Ziblatt's words played on Oliver's mind for the rest of the class. He felt like such a disappointment.

He was so consumed with his embarrassment that he hardly took in anything she said, and he didn't dare look to his left at Esther. The image of her crimson cheeks seemed seared into his mind.

When the lesson was over, Oliver couldn't get out soon enough. He hurried for the exit, trying to position himself in the middle of his group of friends. But in his haste to maneuver himself within them, Oliver bumped his shoulder against someone.

"Sorry!" he said, turning to see whom he'd collided with.

He saw shiny black hair. Emerald green eyes. It was Esther.

"Don't worry," she said quickly, immediately tipping her eyes down to her feet. Then she hurried away.

Oliver couldn't help but think she was trying to get away from him as quickly as she could. He felt crushed.

As the students made their way out of the lecture theater, Oliver felt a slap on his back. He turned to see Hazel smiling kindly.

"Don't look so sad," she told him, encouragingly. "You didn't do that bad!"

"I made a fool of myself," Oliver said glumly.

Walter grinned widely. “At least you didn’t barf,” he quipped. Oliver just grimaced.

Ralph looked down at Oliver with an empathetic expression. “Just put it all behind you,” he said. “There’s always the next class.”

“Another chance to fail, you mean?” Oliver said glumly. “Great.”

Simon patted his back. “Cheer up, mate. It’ll be fine.”

Walter added, “And it can’t get any worse than it did back in Doctor Ziblatt’s class, right?”

Hazel punched him in the arm.

“Ow,” Walter moaned, rubbing the spot where she’d hit him.

Just then, Oliver felt a vibration in his overalls. He pulled out his plastic timetable. The coordinates had changed, indicating that he was required on the fourteenth floor. There wasn’t any time to rest at all. No time to absorb anything he’d just learned. Everything at the School for Seers was go, go, go!

“We’d better hurry,” Ralph said, placing his own vibrating timetable back into his pocket.

Oliver felt a sense of dread as he followed them across the rapidly moving walkway. He felt like he’d bitten off far more than he could chew. Maybe he wasn’t supposed to be here at all. Maybe he didn’t belong.

Everyone piled into the elevator, riding it up to the fourteenth floor. Then they headed to another classroom. On the door, the word *Transformation* flashed in soft white letters. Oliver gulped.

They went inside and Oliver saw that it was decked out just like a science laboratory, but not like the type at school with wooden benches and a handful of Bunsen burners. It looked more like the high-tech laboratories of a medical or chemical company. The place was gleaming white.

“Students, take your seats,” the teacher said. He was a young man with a moustache.

“That’s Mr. Lazzarato,” Ralph said, leaning in to Oliver.

Oliver nodded, trying his best to absorb yet more information into his very saturated mind.

Mr. Lazzarato began to speak. “Last week, our top student was Miss Kerr. She was the only student who managed to successfully rearrange the chemical matter she was given to create a small fire. So let’s all give a hand to Hazel.”

Everyone clapped, and Oliver looked over to see Hazel beaming.

Mr. Lazzarato continued. “Today I’m hoping for some good things from Mr. Black. With a biological specialism, this task should be easiest for you.”

Oliver saw Ralph blush deeply. From what he’d told Oliver, he struggled with his powers. Not much came easily to Ralph.

Walter huffed then. “I swear, having a magnetic specialism is the worst,” he grumbled. “We’ve never done a single task where I’ve had the chance to excel.”

Mr. Lazzarato continued. “Mr. Cavendish,” he said, looking at Simon. “Can you hand out the worksheets? And Mr. Branner,

please hand out the boxes.”

Simon went up to the front of the class and collected the stack of papers. At the same time, Edmund headed toward a cart that had several small thermoplastic boxes on it.

“What are those?” Hazel mused aloud, squinting to try and see into the boxes.

Oliver craned his neck. In each box there appeared to be a small, white mouse.

“Mice!” he told her. “We’re not going to dissect them, are we?”

Simon appeared then with their worksheets. Oliver quickly read the title and saw that far from dissecting mice, their task was to rearrange their anatomical components.

“I’ll never be able to do this,” he stammered.

“Don’t worry, neither will I!” Ralph said jovially. “I mean, you saw me with the leaf. I’m useless.”

“At least you can do that,” Oliver replied. “I can’t do anything!”

His failure in Doctor Zibblatt’s class was still consuming his thoughts.

Just then, Edmund reached their bench. He was pushing the cart with the boxes on it, each with a white mouse inside. Edmund dumped a box in front of Ralph, then one in front of Hazel. When he got to Oliver he held up a box different from the others. It was covered in wires and had a computer attached to one side.

“More training wheels for Oliver,” he sneered, dumping the box down. “Most of us can do transformation without tools. But you’ll have to rely on some help just like those goggles in the last class.” He paused and grinned devilishly. “Speaking of which, it was *so* embarrassing for you. Everyone saw you staring at Esther in the holograph! And then your little panic attack! Haha, it was hilarious.”

Oliver felt his cheeks growing hotter and hotter as Edmund spoke. Not just from embarrassment but from rage. He thought he’d finally escaped the bullies in his life but clearly he had not. Even here, at this wonderful, magical place, he was being picked on. He tugged at the neckline of his overalls.

Beside him, Hazel spoke under her breath. “Just ignore him, Oliver.”

But Edmund wasn’t done. He could tell he’d gotten under Oliver’s skin with his comments. He laughed nastily. “You should know you don’t stand a chance with Esther Valentini, by the way. She’ll only ever date the best switchit player in the school. And that is me.”

A sudden lump formed painfully in Oliver’s throat at the thought of Edmund and Esther together.

Walter leaned over suddenly. “Edmund, we all know *I’m* the best switchit player. If Esther cared about switchit, she’d be dating me!”

Edmund snapped his mouth shut and glared at Walter. “You wish,” he spat, before storming off.

Oliver deflated. He looked over at his friends. “Thanks,” he muttered.

He turned his attention to the task at hand, and looked down at the box. It was covered in buttons, screens, and other electronic components. Inside, a small white mouse scurried around.

“Am I going to hurt it?” Oliver asked with concern. “Rearranging its atoms sounds painful.”

“It won’t feel a thing,” Hazel told him. “The first thing to do is suspend it in time.”

“Of course...” Oliver murmured.

Mr. Lazzarato began reminding the class on the first steps to freezing their mouse in time. Oliver, however, just had to press a button. It felt like cheating to skip out that first step, but his powers weren’t strong enough for him to attempt such complex things without his “training wheels.”

Oliver pressed the button and instantly the mouse became completely frozen, its little nose pointing upward mid-sniff. It was a peculiar sight. Oliver struggled to get his head around the fact the mouse was stuck in time, like his brain couldn’t fully accept it. A bit like with the invisibility patch. He was starting to understand why a human brain could explode if exposed to too much Seer-related information too quickly!

“Got it!” Hazel suddenly exclaimed.

Oliver looked over, stunned by what he saw. In Hazel’s box, the little white mouse had changed. It looked like an adorable cartoon character, with big eyes and eyelashes. It was even

standing on its hind legs.

“Amazing!” Oliver stammered.

“Gosh, Hazel,” Simon added. “That was jolly fast work.”

Walter clapped Hazel’s success, clearly thrilled for her. But Ralph had still not achieved anything.

“I thought this was supposed to be easy for me,” he said.

As Hazel went to show Mr. Lazzarato her mouse, the rest of the gang bowed their heads over their worksheets. Oliver tried to absorb all the information but never before had he felt so challenged. School had always been easy for him. Finally, he was somewhere he would be pushed to grow and hopefully, one day, excel. But that seemed very far away from his reach right now.

Oliver attached the electrodes on the box to his temples. He felt a strange pulsing sensation which seemed to make his mind become foggy. Then he closed his eyes and visualized what he wanted to achieve; a muscular mouse like some kind of wrestler.

The sheet had said it would take thirty seconds to take effect, and so Oliver waited, counting through the numbers in his head. It was remarkably difficult. The pulses coming from the electrode made it feel as if his thoughts were swimming in soup.

Finally, he made it to thirty and opened his eyes. The mouse was exactly the same. Disappointment bit at him.

“I can’t do it,” he said, sadly.

“Don’t worry,” Walter said. “It’s hard.”

But in Walter’s own box, his mouse had changed. Not a lot, but he’d definitely made its head bigger and its tail longer. Despite

Walter's claims that magnetism was a bad specialism to have, he'd still had more success than Oliver.

"What's the worst specialism for a Seer?" Oliver asked.

Walter pondered for a moment. "Sonar, probably. Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm sure my test will show me that I've got it," Oliver replied. "Either that or it will show me I'm not a Seer at all!"

Walter shook his head kindly. "You failed at your first attempt, that's all. It's not the end of the world."

"Don't get disheartened," Simon added. "Try and try again."

"Easy for you to say," Ralph huffed, clearly growing frustrated with his own failure. "Your specialism is molecular. It's a close second place after atomic if you ask me."

They returned to their work. Despite his best efforts, Oliver had no success. He started to feel like the electrodes were hampering him. He understood that they were meant to teach him how to get his mind into the correct state, but he found the pulsing irritating.

He decided to attempt it without the electrodes. Switching his mind into the correct mindset wasn't easy but Oliver did manage to emulate the same soupy, leaden feeling the pulse had given him. Only this time, his mind was clearer. Counting wasn't such a struggle. He felt more in control, and the image in his mind of his muscled mouse was easier to hold on to.

Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty...

Oliver opened his eyes. He squinted at the mouse, then tipped

his head to the side, searching for any sign of transformation.

“It looks a bit bigger,” Walter said.

“No it doesn’t,” Oliver replied. He knew Walter was just trying to cheer him up.

Giving up, Oliver pressed the button that would unfreeze the mouse. He watched it come back to life, scurrying around the box and sniffing. Then suddenly it rose up onto its back legs so that it was standing tall, and flexed its arm muscles.

Oliver gasped. The mouse returned to scurrying around the box. Had he just been seeing things, or had he actually managed to change the atoms inside the mouse? Only a little, and nowhere near the wrestler mouse he’d been attempting, but it was still something! Maybe he wasn’t completely useless after all.

Oliver felt buoyed by his first tiny success. But he knew the test was still to come.

Mr. Lazzarato called an end to the class. Everyone packed up their things and started to leave.

Just then, a fist slammed down on the table in front of Oliver. He startled and looked up. He found himself staring into Edmund’s mean, black eyes.

“Next class we’re playing switchit,” he said, menacingly, “and I’m going to kick your butt.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Oliver followed his friends into the atrium for switchit practice. The room was just as enormous as the food hall and library. It looked in every way like an oversized basketball court except for the fact there were about a thousand different baskets at varying heights. It was enough to give Oliver a headache looking at them all.

But more than the size of the court, Oliver was most overwhelmed by the caged bars at one end of the room, behind which, lurking in the shadows, were the ostreagles. They looked just as mean as normal eagles, only they were ten times the size. The thought of riding one was very intimidating for Oliver.

He turned to his friends.

“How do you even play this game?” he asked. “There are so many hoops. Are there lots of balls as well?”

Walter, who’d made it clear that he thought of himself as some kind of switchit expert, began to explain the rules. “You use your powers to hide the ball or distort it in some way so that the others don’t know who’s got it and what hoop you’re throwing it into.”

Ralph added, “Of course, the best players use their powers to multiply the ball and score in several hoops at once.”

Oliver’s eyebrows rose. “You mean we don’t play in teams? It’s pretty much you versus everyone else?”

“Of course it’s not in teams,” Walter said as though it were

obvious. “You get one point for blocking someone else’s attempt to score a bucket, and three points for scoring your own. The person with the most points after sixty minutes wins. So it’s a game of power, strength, and endurance.”

“And aggression,” Ralph interrupted. “I mean, it’s not like there are many Seers who make a career out of defending.”

Hazel nodded her agreement. “That’s true. The winner is usually the person who’s confident and aggressive enough to go for the shots.”

“I told you it was vulgar,” Simon added.

Oliver felt apprehensive. The rules of switchit made the sport sound a little ruthless, not to mention tiring.

“And this all happens on the back of one of those?” he asked, incredulously, pointing to the caged ostreagles. He didn’t like the thought of having a dozen of them chasing after him in one go.

“Yup,” Walter said, grinning. He slapped him on the back. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

Simon added, “And if you don’t enjoy it, then you’ll be in good company. I thoroughly dislike this game.”

Oliver followed his friends over to where the coach was leading the students, one at a time, into the caged room. Oliver joined the back of the queue, feeling his nerves intensify. From the front, Edmund and Vinnie were whispering and pointing at him. Edmund shook his fist and Oliver gulped.

As each of his friends disappeared into the dark room, his apprehension grew. Then it was his turn.

Coach Finkle was a tall, skinny man with curly ginger hair. He peered down at Oliver curiously as they walked in through the caged gates.

“You’re new,” he stated.

Oliver nodded. “And scared. I’ve never ridden an ostreagle.”

As he said it, one of the huge creatures loomed into view. He balked at the size of it.

“Well, there’s only one way to learn,” Coach Finkle said. He patted the ostreagle’s flank and it let out a chirruping kind of noise. “And that’s to just go for it. Mabel here is very gentle. She’s good with a beginner.”

Oliver trembled as he approached the formidable-looking Mabel. Her eyes were yellow and piercing. He touched her feathered side gently. She let out another chirrup.

Coach Finkle spoke again. “You’ll need this.”

He placed a helmet on Oliver’s head. Right away, Oliver felt a strange pulsing sensation between his ears.

“Not more training aids,” he groaned. “I’m the only one who has to use them! Everyone will laugh at me!”

“They all had to use them once too,” Coach Finkle told him flatly.

But Oliver knew that didn’t matter one bit. Whether the other students had needed aids or not was beside the point. *He* was the only one using them today. It made him different.

“Come on,” Coach Finkle said impatiently.

Resigning himself to wearing the helmet, Oliver climbed onto

the back of the animal. It was surprisingly comfortable. Mabel's feathers felt soft as he took hold of them in his fists, just by the base of her neck.

With everyone mounted, Coach Finkle went over to the gate and put his hand on a lever. "Ready, set, go!" He pulled the lever and the gate flew upward. The ostreagles shot forward.

Oliver held on tight, the wind whipping in his face from the speed. Then suddenly he was out of the shadows and onto the huge court, flying upward through the air. Above him he could see Hazel. To his side was Ralph. But his mind felt slow. The pulsing from the helmet made him feel sleepy and disoriented.

Suddenly, someone whizzed past him.

"Nice hat, dummy!" came Edmund's voice.

Oliver glanced all about him, but Edmund had already gone. Then a voice called from above.

"It's safest at the top!"

It was Simon's unmistakable British accent. But all Oliver could make out was his pale blond hair.

He felt flustered. The helmet was practically blinding him. If Edmund really wanted to kick his butt, then his near-blindness would certainly give him the advantage!

Far below, Oliver could just make out Coach Finkle holding a basketball. The coach threw it directly up into the air. The game was on.

The ostreagles reacted immediately. It was if the ball contained some kind of homing beacon. Everyone swooped for

it. Oliver's stomach flipped as Mabel soared through the air in pursuit.

"No, stop!" he yelled at her. All he could see were blurs. It made his stomach swirl.

Suddenly, Mabel halted. She let out a snort that sounded very much like annoyance.

"I'm sorry," Oliver told her, breathing slowly to calm his racing heartbeat. "I can hardly see a thing. If I go down there, I'll get pounded!"

Mabel flew in slow circles. Oliver had no idea if she could understand what he'd told her but she was heeding his instructions nonetheless, letting out disgruntled snorts every now and again.

From his position high above, Oliver watched the frightening sight of the ostreagles as they all homed in on one person. He realized it was Walter they were pursuing. It was like watching vultures circling their prey.

I'm going to be terrible at this game, Oliver thought. Not only was his mind feeling far too slow to keep up, he didn't want to even touch the ball if it meant all those birds bearing down on him!

He squinted, trying to see what was happening. Walter was moving through the atrium so fast Oliver's slurred mind could hardly make out what was happening.

Walter's specialism for magnetism clearly lent itself well to switchit. He used his power to imbue the ball with a strong

magnet. It was attracted to one of the hoops and whizzed across the atrium so fast it was barely perceptible. Then it went straight through the hoop.

A claxon sounded. Walter punched the air with triumph.

“Three points, Walter Stroud,” Coach Finkle shouted.

But there was no respite, Oliver realized, because Coach Finkle already had a new ball in his hands. He threw it up and the game began again.

Beneath him, Oliver could feel Mabel growing more frustrated. She desperately wanted to join in the fun. But Oliver’s head spun. He couldn’t stay focused on anything around him. He could hardly tell who was whom, let alone whereabouts of the small ball in the enormous atrium. It was frustrating. There was no way he’d score any buckets like this.

“Come on, Oliver,” he heard Hazel call out. “Join in!”

He glanced over to see a blurred shape whoosh past him. The only thing that made it unmistakably Hazel was the color of butterscotch. His desire to join in grew even more. He didn’t want to be like Simon and miss out on all the fun.

Then suddenly someone was racing right toward him. Oliver felt a sudden electric shock zap through him. Mabel shuddered in pain and Oliver lost his grip on her feathers. There was a collective gasp as Oliver slid off her side.

Panicking, he grasped forward and gripped her talons by his fingertips. He was now dangling hundreds of feet in the air, barely clinging on. With all his strength, Oliver heaved himself

back onto Mabel's back.

As his adrenaline subsided, Oliver noticed another ostreagle hovering beside them. On its back, he could just make out Edmund.

"Told you I'd kick your butt," he scoffed.

Oliver felt incensed. Edmund had used his powers to zap Oliver and his ostreagle. It was a dirty trick. He already had the upper hand without the helmet, which made it an even cheaper shot. Oliver wasn't going to stand for it.

Oliver reached up and detached the helmet. Right away, the horrible pulsing feeling disappeared. His vision refocused. He locked eyes with Edmund then dropped the helmet to the ground.

"Think you can do this without your powers?" Edmund said with a smirk. "Good luck!"

"Powers or not, at least it will be a fair fight," Oliver shot back.

Edmund glared at him coldly. Then he kicked his ostreagle's flank and the creature darted away.

Within seconds, Edmund had the ball. He whizzed upward in a zigzagging motion. Little bolts of electricity trailed behind him, keeping the pursuing ostreagles off him. Then Edmund threw the ball toward a hoop. But instead of the ball going into the hoop, it completely vanished.

All the ostreagles stopped mid-flight, casting their hawkish gazes around the court, waiting for the ball to reappear somewhere else.

It did, right beside Hazel. She'd used her power to make the

ball jump from one location to another. The claxon sounded out for Hazel's block point and below Coach Finkle announced, "One point, Hazel Kerr." Oliver was thoroughly impressed, not to mention glad that Edmund hadn't scored.

Hazel went to grab the ball. But a sudden pulse went through the atrium, like the rippling of a pebble on water. It pushed the ball away from Hazel's fingers and floated it right into Esther's hands. Her ostreagle raced to the closest hoop. Esther dunked the ball for a bucket. The claxon sounded.

"Three points, Esther Valentini."

"Awesome," Oliver said aloud. He was getting a feel for the game now that he could actually see what was going on.

Far below, Coach Finkle was ready to launch a ball up to begin play.

Clutching onto Mabel, Oliver asked her, "Are you ready? I want to join in this time."

She snorted happily.

Coach Finkle threw the ball. Mabel went flying. Oliver's stomach flipped as he plummeted through the air.

Suddenly the ball disappeared. Mabel stopped soaring downward, making Oliver's stomach flip again. Then the ball reappeared right beside Oliver. He suspected Hazel had done this, to give him a chance at a shot.

Mabel surged for the ball. From below, the other ostreagles also surged upward. Oliver didn't have time to think. He grabbed the ball and threw it with all his might at the nearest hoop.

It soared through the air, right on target. But suddenly electricity zapped all around the hoop, completely melting it. The ball sailed onward, where the hoop had been, but no points were awarded to Oliver.

As the claxon sounded for the block point, Oliver glanced around to see who had blocked him. To his irritation, it was Edmund who'd blocked his point by melting the hoop. He punched the air with frustration.

“One point, Edmund Branner.”

“Nice try!” Hazel called to Oliver as she swooped past.

Oliver knew she'd done everything she could to help him but without using his powers, he'd never get any points.

Once again, Coach Finkle had the ball. He shouted up, “Cavendish! Get involved!”

From the highest point of the atrium, Simon's ostreagle hovered. Simon waved languorously from its back. He clearly had no intention of joining in the game at all. But Oliver wanted to. He wanted to get a bucket. Three points would be more than Edmund had, and beating him would feel like winning to Oliver.

Coach Finkle threw the ball. Oliver charged downward on Mabel's back. Edmund got to it first. He grabbed the ball and threw it immediately to the nearest hoop, which just so happened to be at Oliver's right shoulder.

Everything happened in a split second. Oliver wanted to stop the ball from entering the hoop so much his mind immediately shifted to the place where he could summon his powers. Oliver

cast his mind out to the ball, commanding its atoms to change.

Suddenly, the ball transformed in midair, turning from a solid ball into a strange viscous goo. It had been just a mere inch from the ring of the hoop but now it dribbled through the air and turned to a puddle on the ground.

The strain of using his fledgling powers made Oliver's forehead bead with sweat. But it was worth the effort when he heard the claxon.

“One point, Oliver Blue.”

He'd gotten a point! He'd blocked Edmund's shot! Even without the helmet, he'd summoned his powers! Oliver felt on top of the world. He'd never been good at sport, and yet here he was having the time of his life, actually exceling. He could get used to this.

“Go Oliver!” his friends started to cheer.

He looked over and Ralph flashed him a thumbs-up. Then he caught sight of Esther. She looked thoroughly impressed and flashed him a gorgeous smile.

But there was very little time to celebrate. The ball appeared once again in Coach Finkle's hands. Once more he threw it directly into the air.

Quick as a flash, Edmund was there. He looked more determined than ever as he caught the ball.

Oliver's stomach flipped as Mabel plummeted downward, beelining, like all the other birds, for the ball in Edmund's hands. But Mabel was faster than the others, more determined,

as though their win earlier was driving her on. They pulled ahead of the rest of the flock.

As the distance between Oliver and Edmund diminished, Oliver could see the look of sheer concentration on Edmund's face. He was clearly trying to summon his powers. By the looks of things he wasn't succeeding. Sweat was rolling from his forehead. He glanced over at Oliver, his teeth gritted, his expression alarmed at the sight of the ostreagle bearing down on him at its frightening speed.

"Throw the ball!" Oliver exclaimed.

But Edmund was still gripping it, willing his powers to work.

Oliver realized what was going to happen a second before it did. He only had time to cover his eyes with his hands. Then CRASH. His ostreagle slammed into Edmund's. Both boys fell from their ostreagles and began to plummet toward the ground.

Oliver let out a huge scream as the floor raced up to meet him. But instead of smacking into a hard ground he found the surface he landed upon was as soft as a feather pillow. He bounced gently, the floor yielding to his weight like foam. He realized Coach Finkle had used his powers to change the physical properties of the floor so that it was bouncy, because after a second of bouncing, the floor returned to a solid state.

Lying on his back, staring up at the two riderless ostreagles circling above, Oliver blinked in surprise. Then suddenly, Edmund appeared above him. His face was red with rage.

"You idiot!" he screamed, grabbing Oliver by the shoulders.

“You flew into me on purpose!”

Oliver batted at Edmund’s hands. “I didn’t mean to! My ostreagle wanted the ball and there was no way I could stop her. I told you to throw it!”

Edmund’s face was red with rage as he shook Oliver roughly, zaps of electricity sparking from his fingertips, each one like a small stabbing needle.

Oliver wasn’t going to lie there and take it. He might have taken Chris’s thrashings, but he wasn’t going to take it anymore, not here, at the School for Seers, at the place where he finally, truly belonged. It had been building all day, this tension between him and Edmund, and now it was finally exploding.

With all the strength he could muster, Oliver pushed out with his arms. But as he did so, some other force from inside him burst out. His powers. He’d made no attempt to conjure them, and yet his mind had visualized so clearly his hands turning to solid steel that he’d made it materialize as a reality before him. And his two steel hands were so strong, they sent Edmund flying.

Time seemed to slow down as Edmund arced through the air across the vast expanse of the court. He hit the ground hard and let out a yelp of pain.

Oliver sat up suddenly, his mouth agape. He had not meant to push out with his mind like that. He touched his head. There was no perspiration like he’d felt when using his powers before. It was as if certain situations brought his powers out without effort on his part, like the time when Chris had tried to harm him. His

powers had protected him then, as they had now. It had been uncontrolled, unexpected. He'd hurt Edmund badly when all he'd wanted was for the bullying to stop. Shame swirled inside of him.

All around him, the class were muttering, whispering; his sudden explosion of power had taken everyone by surprise. He wasn't sure if anyone had seen him transform his own body, though. To go from barely altering the structure of a mouse in Transformation class to doing it with his own body seemed like a huge leap for Oliver.

He looked down at his hands, which had returned to normal. How had he done that? Without even meaning to he'd rearranged the atoms of his own flesh, turning skin to metal. Surely that was the sort of power that took years to train to achieve? Could it be, Oliver wondered, that he had an atomic specialism after all? Had his failures not been because he was weak, but because he possessed the specialism that was the hardest to hone?

Suddenly, Coach Finkle was there beside him. He glowered down at Oliver.

"You. Headmaster's office. Now."

Oliver gulped. "H...headmaster?" he stammered.

Coach Finkle crossed his arms, looking thoroughly unimpressed. "You heard me, Blue. Go."

"I don't know where the headmaster's office is," Oliver admitted.

"Take the elevator to the top floor. It's through the door into the sixth dimension," Coach Finkle said, irritated. He turned and

marched away from Oliver, calling out to the others, “Someone get the nurse!”

Oliver got to his feet. Over on the other side of the court, the rest of the kids were landing and dismounting their ostreagles, crowding around Edmund to see if he was okay. Vinnie glowered at Oliver. He wasn’t going to let him get away with this.

But whatever retribution Vinnie and Edmund would line up for him, it was going to be nothing in comparison to the headmaster. This was not how Oliver had wanted things to go. With a mixture of disappointment and terrified anticipation of his punishment, Oliver scurried away.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Oliver rode the elevator up to the very top of the School for Seers. He looked around for the headmaster's office and found a door with a big number six on it.

He went to knock but the door opened before his knuckles had even collided with the surface. Cautiously, he stepped inside and called out, "Hello?"

The second Oliver crossed over the threshold, he began to float. It was dark inside the room, like the vacuum of space. Light came from a galaxy of multicolored orbs floating about the place. Oliver reached out and touched one as he passed. It spiraled away from him just like an object in zero gravity would.

"Oliver, is that you?" a voice called.

Oliver looked all about him. He couldn't tell from where the voice had spoken. There wasn't anyone around, as far as he could see.

"Up here, Oliver. Coo-ee!"

Oliver looked up and saw, floating with his arms and legs outstretched, a very kind-looking man. He had a broad smile and was wearing a shiny orange two-piece suit. If this was the headmaster of the School for Seers, he wasn't anything at all like Oliver's imagination had conjured. And he didn't seem to be about to punish Oliver for his fight with Edmund, either.

Confused, Oliver watched as the man floated toward him,

propelling himself like a swimmer through a pool. He reached Oliver, floating to his side. They shook hands.

“I’m Professor Amethyst,” he said, his smile growing ever broader.

“I’m Oliver Tu—”

“I know who you are!” Professor Amethyst interrupted. “Since I can see the past, present, and future of every timeline, I’ve gotten to know all about you.”

Oliver blinked with surprise. “You have?”

It was very difficult to maintain a conversation while he was floating around, and it didn’t help matters that at times he’d spin so that he was facing away from the headmaster.

“Oh yes,” Professor Amethyst said. “You’re a very important young man, Oliver. Some might say you’re as important as I am, but that depends on which history book you’re reading, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said, spinning to face the man who was currently floating behind him. “But what do you mean?”

Doctor Zibblatt had seemed certain Oliver couldn’t be the one they were waiting for. With all his failures, Oliver was inclined to agree with her. But the headmaster seemed to be suggesting the opposite. Oliver didn’t even dare hope that the headmaster was right about this.

“It will all become clear,” Professor Amethyst said. “One bit of information at a time. We don’t want your head to...”

“...explode,” Oliver finished. He’d heard the mantra enough

now.

Professor Amethyst chuckled. “I called for you now because in ninety-nine point nine percent of timelines, Edmund comes to his senses and knocks you silly.”

“Oh,” Oliver said. “About that...”

“I’m not going to give you an ear-lashing,” Professor Amethyst said. “Although I can’t tolerate violence in my school and you’ll be punished in due course. But that’s not what this meeting is for. This is an introduction. A welcome.”

Oliver felt relieved to be temporarily let off the hook.

“Can we sit down somewhere?” he asked. “This spinning is making me seasick.”

“Of course,” Professor Amethyst replied.

He clicked his fingers and in the blink of an eye, the space transformed. The galaxy disappeared and Oliver was suddenly sitting on a couch. Just a plain brown leather couch, with a slight rip in the armrest. There was a fireplace to the left, and a coffee table ahead of him, sitting on a weathered Persian rug.

“Is this more what you’re used to?” Professor Amethyst said.

Oliver looked around at the room, which had the appearance of an old 1940s-era study. His head spun from the suddenness of the transformation that had taken place before his eyes. Professor Amethyst must be a very powerful Seer if he could rearrange all those atoms so quickly without breaking a sweat.

“I guess,” Oliver said.

“Good, then let’s begin,” Professor Amethyst said. He leaned

forward, his elbows resting on his knobby knees. “Firstly, I want to apologize.”

“Apologize for what?” Oliver asked, blinking with confusion.

“For the death of your guide. Inventor Illstrom, wasn’t it?”

Oliver felt a horrible sinking feeling in his chest at the mention of Armando’s name. He’d not given anywhere near enough thought to his deceased hero since coming to the school; he’d let the factory fade into the back of his focus. He felt awful about that now, about letting Armando’s murder take second fiddle to his adventure at the school.

But then another thought struck him. Why was Professor Amethyst apologizing for that?

“Armando’s death wasn’t your fault,” Oliver said.

“No,” Professor Amethyst replied. “But as the headmaster at the school, it’s my responsibility to assign all Seers a guide. He was perfect for you but the timing was unfortunate. I’ve checked all the timelines, Oliver, pulled on a lot of dimensional threads. Those few days you had with him were the best I could manage.”

He looked downcast, as though it were a personal failure that Armando had died so soon after coming into Oliver’s life. Oliver wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to comfort the old professor, so ended up just sitting there in the awkward silence.

Finally, he spoke.

“Was Armando supposed to tell me about my destiny?” Oliver asked. “Because he didn’t get the chance, really. It was all so fast, my time in the factory, I mean.”

Professor Amethyst nodded. “His role was to start you on your journey. Becoming a Seer is psychologically taxing. I’m sure you’re aware of that. It’s not easy to accept the fact that the physical world can be bent and manipulated, or to experience time travel and contrasting versions of events. These things are beyond usual human comprehension. The guide is there to help you onto the first step, so to speak. To give you parts of the puzzle that won’t make your brain melt.”

Oliver nodded solemnly. Clearly, things were more complex than he’d ever anticipated.

“Can *you* tell me?” he asked. “Now that I’m here at the school? Because people keep saying things about specialisms. And my powers seem to come when I don’t mean them to, and not when I want them. Then I have these visions...”

“Oliver,” Professor Amethyst said gently, interrupting his tirade. “No brain can take everything in at once. Trust that you are learning everything at the pace you can handle. If we tell the wrong person the wrong thing at the wrong time, things implode. Whole timelines can collapse when mistakes are made. If I told you everything I knew, for example, your head would pop like a balloon. It’s taken me centuries to absorb all the knowledge I have. Everything must be taken slowly and steadily.”

Centuries, Oliver thought. Did that mean the headmaster had been alive for hundreds of years? How old was he really?

He was about to ask when Professor Amethyst spoke again. “Let’s start at the beginning. What we can do right here, right

now, is find out your specialism.”

“The test!” Oliver exclaimed.

In all the drama, he'd forgotten about the test that would tell him his specialism and eer type, whether he would be cobalt or bromine. When he'd gone to sleep last night the thoughts had been consuming him. But throughout the day, he hadn't thought much about it at all. He'd even forgotten about his timetable telling him where to be and when. He checked it now and realized he was in the exact place and time for his test. This was where it was meant to take place all along.

“You've probably heard the names of the nine specialisms by now,” Professor Amethyst began. “Biological, sonar, chemical, molecular, magnetic, electrical, elemental, nuclear. Then there's the most powerful specialism: atomic.”

“From what I've seen of my classmates, all Seers have great powers,” Oliver said. “Everyone's been able to manipulate the environment to their advantage in one way or another.”

Professor Amethyst smiled. “Wise beyond your years. A telltale sign of an atomic specialism.”

Oliver felt his cheeks warm. He was excited by the prospect of having atomic powers, but at the same time he felt like it would be something of a burden, as though there'd be some kind of expectation he'd have to live up to. He didn't want there to be any bad blood between him and his new friends, and he'd already witnessed Ralph's upset at not being able to do something a Seer with a biological specialism ought to, and Walter complaining

that his magnetic specialism was weak. It didn't seem to matter that they were all amazing, they still had hang-ups. Oliver hated the idea of adding to that in any way.

And what if his type was cobalt? What would an atomic specialism mean in the hands of a cobalt Seer? Was the combination potentially more dangerous? Oliver felt his nerves increase.

"I've heard that there's more to being a Seer than just the specialism," he said, timidly. He swallowed. "That there are also two types."

Professor Amethyst looked a little disappointed. "You've been told," he said, sighing. "I prefer my first-years not to get terrified about types but these things can't be avoided. Whispers spread." He shook his head, then continued. "Yes. Bromine and cobalt. Try not to get bogged down by the terms. At the end of the day it's what you do with your powers that makes the difference. All Seers have the potential to be the greatest. And all Seers have the same mission; to protect the universe and the innocent humans that inhabit her."

His words took root in Oliver's mind. There was a mission, a collective one to protect the universe. Ralph had told him as much when they'd looked through the library book but Oliver hadn't fully understood it. Now he realized he had a duty to protect mankind.

"Who are we protecting the universe from exactly?" he asked. Professor Amethyst's expression turned grave. "In every

moment in history, in every dimension, there are villains intent on causing destruction and imbalance. Some are aided by rogue Seers. We view them as our enemies.”

“But why?” Oliver asked. “Why would people want to cause destruction?”

“Power?” the headmaster mused. “Human nature? We may not know why, all we know for certain is what they do. Hitler. Genghis Khan. Jack the Ripper. History is littered with these people. Rogue Seers are drawn to them and their destructiveness, their lust for chaos. They team up to wreak havoc on timelines, to try and twist the events of history. You can spot rogue Seers by their very peculiar shimmering blue eyes. It is imperceptible to all but a Seer. We can see them for what they are. And our mission, here at the School for Seers, is to follow the universe’s guidance to keep the timelines in order, preventing their destructive actions, rewriting those that have slipped past our detection, and minimizing the destruction of those that cannot be eradicated.”

Oliver could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had a destiny to keep mankind safe from the most awful people who ever existed.

“But...” he began, “the fact that I know who those people are and know what they’ve done, doesn’t that mean they’ve already succeeded and we’ve already failed?”

He was drawing on the information Ralph had imparted on him, about how all time already existed, and how all events that

could happen had happened.

Professor Amethyst smiled at Oliver with an impressed look. “*Au contraire*, Oliver. What you know of those people is just a fraction of what they could have done. Indeed, what they have done in other timelines. If there weren’t Seers stopping them at every turn, their actions would have been far greater.”

Oliver pondered this for a moment. The thought of a Hitler who’d done things even worse than what he knew of was quite terrifying.

Then a new thought struck him.

“It’s an endless task, isn’t it?” he asked. “With all these timelines all happening at once. It’s like a game of chess. We move and they countermove. They change history and we try to change it back. When does it ever end?”

Professor Amethyst looked at him earnestly. “It doesn’t end, Oliver. And that’s why it is so hard to be a Seer. So challenging. It is a huge responsibility, one that you will have to bear for the rest of your days. You must work hard here and hone your skills. You have the potential to become one of the absolute strongest, greatest, most powerful Seers that ever lived. You must train, and concentrate, and never give up. Whatever you do, resist the dark side, because its lures are strong.” He glanced away, troubled, as though there was something on his mind that he wasn’t telling Oliver. “The fate of the world will soon rest upon your shoulders.”

Oliver swallowed hard. There was no doubt in his mind now

that some difficult, terrifying mission awaited him, one that Professor Amethyst had seen played out before, but one that, when the time came, Oliver would have to face on his own.

“We’re getting sidetracked,” the headmaster said. “The test. Shall we begin?”

After what he’d just heard, Oliver didn’t feel as though he was in the best frame of mind for a test. But he nodded. It was time to find out what he really was.

The headmaster waved his hand in front of his face. Suddenly, a white orb materialized, floating just in front of his nose. It emitted a soft, warm glow.

“Whoa,” Oliver murmured in appreciation.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” the headmaster said. “We call this a pearl.”

Oliver looked at him curiously. “A pearl?”

Professor Amethyst moved his hands so that the pearl danced and swayed in time to his movements. “She’s a brand new world. A parallel dimension. Formed by a diversion in the fabric of the universe. Not yet complete. An infant.”

“Whoa,” Oliver repeated again.

“She’s extremely fragile,” the headmaster continued, the light from the baby dimension reflected in his pupils. “So much potential. So many possibilities.”

Suddenly, Professor Amethyst threw the orb upward. Unlike the ball in switchit that traveled in a normal trajectory, the orb just kept going, flying off quickly.

“NO!” Oliver cried instinctively, reaching for it.

“Butterfingers,” the headmaster said. “You’d best catch her before she smashes. I’d hate for all that potential to be destroyed.”

Oliver caught on quickly. This was the test. Whatever he did to save the infant world would in some way reveal his specialism.

He leapt upward, surprised to find that gravity had loosened its hold on him. Using his arms to propel himself, he was able to swim through the air. Professor Amethyst sat watching from the couch, shrinking into the distance as Oliver swam on.

He could just make out the light of the pearl in the distance. But around him everything grew quiet. The silence was almost tangible. And soon it was joined by an almost suffocating darkness.

Oliver felt his heartbeat begin to quicken. The light of the orb was growing fainter as it disappeared into the vacuum that had suddenly opened around him. He was moving too slowly to reach it. No matter how hard he pumped his arms and legs, he couldn’t get enough speed up to gain on it. But there was a yearning feeling in his chest, like a calling. It was overwhelmingly strong, a force compelling him to save the infant world.

There was only one thing for it. He would have to summon his powers.

Oliver gave himself one more propulsion forward with his arms. As he soared upward he took a deep breath to steady himself and closed his eyes.

At first it was too difficult for Oliver to slip into the strange

half-awake, half-asleep state within which he could summon his powers. But then, as though calling to him from somewhere far away, he felt the call of the pearl. Felt, not heard, for it was like a deep yearning feeling that took hold of every fiber of his being.

All at once, as if suddenly switching to the correct frequency, Oliver's mind clicked into gear. He felt his powers ebbing inside of his mind, growing and swelling. He visualized the orb—delicate, lost, and in danger—and fixed the image in his mind.

He opened his eyes, his focus hazy, barely there, barely in reality, but with the pearl still fixed within the center of his vision. Slowly, he held his hands up, palms cupped, and gently raised them to cradle the pearl. But he couldn't feel her. The orb was just a mirage.

So Oliver pushed out with his mind, willing the orb, wherever she was, to disband her atoms and rearrange them in this place, in the safety of his hands. He pushed and pushed, demanding the new reality take place, the one that existed in his mind. His forehead began to bead with sweat. But he wouldn't give up. Until the little orb was safe in his hands he would not rest. He felt a duty to bring it to safety, to care for it.

Suddenly, a feather-like sensation made his fingers tingle. It was coming from the orb. It was working! He was making it real, literally plucking it out of space, atom by atom, and rebuilding it within his gently cupped hands.

He felt the weight of the pearl increase. The light it emitted grew stronger, brighter, hotter. She began to feel heavy in his

hands, then all at once she was too heavy and the muscles in his arms began to strain. But still he held on and willed the orb to submit to him. It grew hotter still, until it felt like he was holding a lightbulb. Oliver's whole body began to tremble from the effort. He gritted his teeth. Pain raced through his hands, searing his skin.

Then suddenly everything stopped.

Oliver blinked. He was back on the couch, sitting opposite Professor Amethyst. The orb was gone.

Panting, disorientated, Oliver looked down at his hands. They weren't blistered at all. There was no sign he'd ever held the searingly hot pearl.

"Where did she go?" he said with anguish, looking at the headmaster. "The pearl! I lost her."

Professor Amethyst leaned back. One eyebrow slowly rose up his forehead. "The pearl...?"

Oliver felt dazed from the abrupt change, from the sudden absence of the tiny world he'd felt so drawn to protect.

"I lost her," Oliver stammered. He felt a heaviness on his chest. "Does that mean I've failed?"

"You cannot fail the test, Oliver." The headmaster smiled. "The test is to see in what way the sixth dimension affects you. You report your visualizations back to me and I evaluate your experience. Tell me more about this pearl."

Oliver blinked. "Wait. Visualizations? You mean to say none of that was real?"

The headmaster nodded.

Oliver sat back with a huge exhalation. He tried to collect his thoughts, to accept that there was no lost infant world floating out there in danger. He couldn't quite believe that none of what he'd just been through had really happened. It had felt so real. And that pull inside of him to protect the baby universe wasn't something he'd ever felt before in his life. How could he have just thought it up out of thin air?

"The pearl..." the headmaster pressed. "I'm intrigued to know more about it."

Oliver came back to his senses. "It looked a bit like the little balls of light that were floating around when I first came in. Only more spectacular. You told me it was a pearl. An infant world, or dimension. And I had to protect it."

The headmaster's expression was unreadable. He seemed to be grappling with his thoughts. Then he stood. "Come with me."

Oliver stood and followed him across the room. As they walked, the facade of the study that Professor Amethyst had created around them began to melt away until Oliver was walking across a black marble floor in a vast, dark room. From far in the distance, he saw a small glow. Immediately, he felt a tugging sensation deep in his gut.

"That's her," he exclaimed. "The pearl!"

His desire to be near her grew even stronger with each footstep.

"Very interesting," the headmaster muttered.

They drew up to a plinth upon which, floating in midair, was the pearl from Oliver's visualization. Seeing her again caused a wave of emotion to race through him. He reached for her instinctively.

Suddenly, the headmaster batted his hands away. "Don't touch!" he said sternly. "This is the Orb of Kandra. It powers the entire School for Seers. It's our life force. The most precious item in the whole universe."

Oliver stared at it, mesmerized. It was exactly the same as the pearl in his vision. But how? How had he conjured this item in his mind when he'd never before seen it in his life?

"I don't understand," Oliver told the headmaster. "What does it all mean? What am I?"

"Visualizing this is a very good sign, Oliver," Professor Amethyst told him. "It means you are deeply connected to the universe. It means your specialism is indisputably atomic. You are the one we've been waiting for."

Oliver was stunned. He'd all but given up hope that he may be the powerful atomic Seer everyone had been waiting for. The news left him with a mix of emotions. Excitement but also apprehension and a little bit of fear. It was a big piece of news to get his head around. The weight of expectation pressed down heavily on his shoulders.

"But tell me more," the headmaster prompted. "What happened next in your vision?"

"You threw the pearl and I had to try to save it," Oliver said.

"I floated through space but couldn't get to it fast enough. So I used my powers. I visualized it appearing in my hands."

"And it did?"

Oliver nodded. "Yes. At first."

"What do you mean at first?"

"It burned me," Oliver replied. "It got so hot it made my skin hurt."

Professor Amethyst stared at him with rapt attention. "What did you do with it?"

"I held on," Oliver told him. "Then suddenly, it was all over and I was back here."

A small smile played across the headmaster's lips. "Well, well, well. What an intriguing outcome."

"What does it mean?" Oliver asked.

"A bromine Seer would not get burned. But a cobalt Seer would not hold on." His grin widened. "Which means you, my boy, are neither cobalt nor bromine. You are both."

Oliver's jaw slackened. Of all the outcomes he'd been imagining, that was not one of them.

"Both?" he questioned. "How can I be both?"

"It's very rare," the professor explained. "Exceptionally rare. Come to think of it, the combination of atomic powers and a mixed type, well, I don't think we've ever had anything of the sort at the School for Seers. You're one of a kind, Oliver! One of a kind!"

The headmaster seemed thrilled by the news. But Oliver, on

the other hand, was not. He'd spent his entire life being the other, being different, being bullied. Coming here had made him feel like he truly belonged somewhere for the first time. But he didn't belong at all. Because once again, Oliver was the odd one out.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "May I leave now, Professor?" he asked.

"Of course. I'll expect you'll want to run along and tell your friends the good news."

Oliver shook his head. "Actually, I think I'd like to keep this between the two of us. No teachers or students, just us. For a little while at least. Until I've had a chance to process it. Is that okay?"

Professor Amethyst gave him a curious expression. "If that's what you desire, Oliver, then who am I to argue?" He let out a celebratory guffaw and began to float away, muttering to himself as he did. "I wonder if Mistress Obsidian's ever had an atomic-mixed Seer."

Oliver watched him disappear into the darkness. Far from feeling celebratory about the news like the headmaster clearly was, he felt a strange, foreboding feeling deep within his gut. Whatever he was, and whatever he was to become, the journey wasn't going to be smooth.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Oliver rode the superfast elevator down to the ground floor, his encounter in the sixth dimension repeating over and over in his mind. What he'd visualized during his test had been intense. He couldn't get the Orb of Kandra out of his mind. It was awe-inspiring.

When the doors pinged open, Oliver was surprised to see Ralph, Hazel, Walter, and Simon standing beside the huge kapok tree. They all hurried toward him, as though they'd been waiting for him.

"So?" Hazel said, fixing her gray eyes on him.

"What happened?" Ralph pressed.

Oliver knew they wanted to know about the results of his test, but he didn't feel like sharing them. Telling his friends that he had the most powerful specialism of all could cause resentment. Telling them that his Seer type had been mixed was just downright scary.

"Come on, Oliver," Walter cajoled. "Please tell us."

"Nothing happened," Oliver replied evasively. "Professor Amethyst said I'd be punished later and..."

"Not about the fight with Edmund!" Hazel interrupted. "The test! You were called to his office for the test, weren't you?"

Oliver squirmed. He really didn't want to reveal what he'd learned about himself in the sixth dimension, and he didn't want

to talk about the Orb of Kandra. Seeing it had felt special and deeply personal to him, not something to share with anyone.

Simon chuckled and clapped a hand on Oliver's shoulder. "Let's leave him be. Whatever happened in the test, Oliver has a right to his privacy."

"Thanks," Oliver said, grateful for the ally.

The rest of them sighed, clearly disappointed that he wasn't going to divulge anything.

Just then, Oliver felt his timetable vibrating. In the exact same moment, all his friends must have had the same feeling, because everyone's hand darted to their own pocket.

"Dinner time," Hazel said, checking her own device. "Maybe once you've eaten you'll be more in the mood to tell us what happened." She gave him a cheeky smile.

"Hazel," Ralph said in his teacherly, warning voice. "Simon's right. Oliver doesn't have to tell us if he doesn't want to."

Oliver pulled his timetable out from his large overall pocket. But it was not telling him to go to the F court like the rest of his friends. Instead, it was flashing up a large P.

"What does P mean?" he said, looking up.

Walter's eyes widened. Hazel bit her lip.

"What?" Oliver demanded. "What is it?"

"P is for punishment," Ralph explained. He clapped a hand on Oliver's shoulder. "I guess Professor Amethyst wasn't going to let you off that fight with Edmund for long."

Oliver gulped. He had no idea what a punishment at the School

for Seers would look like, and he didn't really want to find out.

"We'd better go," Ralph said. He sounded a little sorry for Oliver. He gave his shoulder a gentle, affectionate punch.

Oliver watched as Simon, Ralph, Hazel, and Walter bustled off together to the F door.

Now alone, Oliver looked down at his timetable. The coordinates seemed to be leading him toward the sleeping atrium. He drew up outside the door and was surprised when the gray Z turned white to indicate he was allowed through. He opened the door into the airlock.

There, set up in the room, was a small table. Upon it sat a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk.

Oliver laughed. This was his punishment? A tiny meal and early to bed? His years in the Blue household had prepared him for the worst. This, he could handle. In fact, considering how many dinners he'd had confiscated by his parents due to bad behavior, a cheese sandwich was luxury.

Oliver sat at the desk and ate slowly. His mind sifted through everything he'd gone through that day—turning his hands to steel; learning that his specialism was atomic; his unusual mixed Seer type; Esther's beautiful green eyes; Edmund's horrible sneer. And above all, the Orb of Kandra. It had been quite the day.

When his sandwich was finished, he headed to the lockers to collect his sleepsuit. He was actually grateful for the downtime, for the moment of quiet to catch his breath, to change slowly

and in peace. The School for Seers was so frantic that he'd really needed this moment to clear his mind, away from the distractions of everyone else.

The airlock light indicated he could now enter the sleeping dorm. He went inside and saw that none of the pods were occupied. Ichiro wasn't even here.

Oliver went up to one of the pods and got inside. He attached his electrodes and heart monitor and closed the lid down. As he lay looking up at the frosted glass, all he could see was the Orb of Kandra. It had enchanted him. Called to him. He didn't understand why or what it meant, but he felt that something in him had changed in its presence.

He yawned deeply. The day had exhausted him. He hit the button to invite slumber. It couldn't come soon enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Oliver sat in Doctor Ziblatt's lecture theater the next morning, the Orb of Kandra on his mind.

As the students continued with their studies, looking through portals into the next dimension, Oliver just could not focus.

Oliver brought his attention to the black splotch in front of him. Each student had their own card today and were working on projecting their minds into the next dimension. Many of them had achieved their goal—Hazel, for example, who was squealing with awe at a grassy field—but many others were still confronted with frustrated failure.

Suddenly, there was a loud clapping sound coming from the other side of the hall. Everyone turned their attention to the noise. It was Edmund. He was standing up, looking triumphant.

“I just looked into yesterday!” he cried.

Immediately, the sound of hubbub from whispering, excited students filled the lecture theater. No one had been able to look into the past or future yet, and Edmund's accomplishment was incredible.

All eyes were on Edmund as he raced down to the front of the hall to show off his amazing talent in the holograph machine.

Just then, Esther turned from the bench in front of them. She fixed her pretty green eyes on Oliver. Oliver gulped hard.

“Edmund's such a show-off,” she said, rolling her eyes. “How

are you getting on?”

Oliver’s throat seemed to constrict. His palms grew sweaty.

“No luck yet,” he managed to stammer. “You?”

She shrugged. “I could do it with the goggles but not without them.”

Oliver suddenly remembered the ridiculous-looking glasses he was wearing. He tore them off, embarrassed.

“So are you settling in now?” Esther asked sweetly. “Know your way around?”

Tongue-tied, Oliver just nodded. “The school’s very big though. I’ve only seen a fraction of it.”

“Have you been to the garden yet?” Esther asked. “I love it there. It’s my favorite place to go.”

“I haven’t been there yet,” Oliver admitted. Then suddenly he blurted, “Maybe you could show me?”

Esther paused. Her lips twitched into a smile. “Yes. I’d like that,” she replied. “After class?”

Oliver nodded, then Esther turned back to face the front.

Hazel leaned over to Oliver.

“Did you just ask Esther out on a date?” she asked, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“Yes,” Oliver squeaked. “I think I did.” Then, with a sudden surge of realization, he added, his voice trembling, “And she said yes!”

Hazel dissolved into fits of giggles. “Nice one, Romeo.”

Ralph looked impressed. “I don’t think Esther’s ever agreed

to date anyone,” he said, slapping Oliver on the back. “Now, just make sure you don’t screw it up.”

*

“Ready?”

Oliver looked up from his card into the eyes of Esther. Class had finished.

“Oh, uh, yes,” he stammered, feeling suddenly shy. He packed up his things and stood, catching his friends out of the corner of his eye winking and throwing thumbs up.

Oliver and Esther left the lecture hall and headed across the main atrium to one of the doors that Oliver had not yet had the opportunity to enter, the one marked with a G. When he opened it, he was surprised to see that it looked in every single way like the outside, though he knew it couldn’t be. Everything in the school was underground, the gardens included, but it really looked like he was walking out into open ground. It even smelled of fresh vegetation and there was a gentle breeze. The air was warm, like a spring morning.

They walked slowly together through the grass, and reached a hedgerow filled with bright pink roses. Beside it was a faded brick path, which they followed together.

“Wow, it’s nice here,” Oliver commented.

“It’s a great place to meditate,” Esther told him. “For those of us who struggle to relax into our powers.”

“You struggle?” he asked her. “Why?”

Esther looked uncomfortable, like she didn't really want to discuss it. “My specialism is sonar,” she said. “It means I'm quite limited.”

“Everyone says that's the worst one,” Oliver commented, recalling the rankings his friends had told him.

Immediately, Oliver regretted his words. Esther looked crushed.

“Not that I think that,” he said hurriedly, trying to backtrack. “I mean, other people say magnetism is the worst so I guess it's a matter of perspective.”

Esther gave a little grunt in response. Oliver felt awful. This was going terribly!

They walked in awkward silence. Esther kicked at some stray pebbles on the path. Oliver racked his brains, desperate for something to say that may save the disastrous date.

“So when are you from?” he asked.

“1977,” she said. “New Jersey. You?”

“New Jersey!” Oliver exclaimed. “Me too! Only about forty years after you.”

“Neat,” she said. “So in your timeline, I'm like fifty years old. Creepy.”

Oliver couldn't tell whether he'd saved the conversation or not. Esther was hard to read. And making her think about herself as an older woman might not have been the best idea. He tried to think of more things to ask her, but Esther spoke up instead.

“So are you Italian?” she asked. “My family are. Were, I should say.”

Oliver heard the hint of melancholy in her voice. It was evident to him that something had happened to Esther’s family. He didn’t want to press it, though.

“Me? No,” he replied, chuckling as he pointed at his sandy blond hair. “My family moves around a lot. We’d only been in New Jersey about a week before I came here. And I don’t really know my ancestry. It’s not really talked about at home. Not much is.”

Now melancholy had seeped into his voice. Families were clearly a touchy subject for the both of them.

Oliver wanted to steer the conversation to something safe. Pets? No, that would be a bit boring. Favorite switchit players? Not something he had a lot of insight into.

But before Oliver had the chance to utter any of his questions, something in the distance caught his eye.

“Hey, look,” he said. “What’s that?”

Esther squinted up at the sky where Oliver was pointing. A dark mass was moving on the horizon, undulating like some kind of strange cloud. It soon became apparent that it was made up of winged creatures, moving like a flock of birds.

“They look like bats to me,” Esther said.

“Have you ever seen bats in the garden before?” Oliver asked. Esther looked confused as she shook her head.

All at once, the cloud of bats changed their trajectory. Now

they were heading right for Oliver and Esther, and they were racing at an alarming speed.

“They’re coming this way,” Oliver stammered, starting to feel wary of the strange sight.

Just then, Oliver saw a flash in the eyes of the bats. It was a peculiar kind of shimmery blue. He remembered instantly Professor Amethyst’s words, about the strange blue color in the eyes of their enemies. Could they be rogue Seers disguised as bats in order to infiltrate the school?

“Rogues!” Oliver shouted.

Esther reached out and grabbed Oliver’s hand, clutching it tightly in hers. She looked petrified.

“We have to stop them getting any further into the school,” Esther said.

“Your sonar shield!” Oliver said, remembering the pulse Esther had used in switchit practice.

A look of determination suddenly came over Esther’s face. She changed her stance so that she was rooted to the ground, then pushed her powers outward. Suddenly, it was as if a shield had been placed around them, like a protective glass cloak.

The bats pelted the protective shield, screeching, flapping their horrible black wings. But they failed to penetrate the protective barrier, slamming instead against it.

Esther pushed the protective shield outward. It ebbed out like ripples on water, driving the bats backward.

Oliver’s mouth gaped open. Esther used her powers with such

beautiful precision it made his heart hammer.

“You’re amazing,” Oliver stammered.

“Thanks,” Esther said through gritted teeth. “But I can’t hold this forever. We need to warn the others. There’s a panic button.”

The strain was evident on her face. Oliver leapt to attention.

“Where’s the button?” Oliver asked.

With her full concentration on the shield, Esther called over her shoulder, “There, in the trees!”

Oliver turned and hurried for the large oak. When he reached it, he searched the bark, frantically trying to find anything that resembled a button. He noticed a raised knot in the bark, too perfectly spherical to be natural. Whispering a silent prayer beneath his breath, Oliver slammed his palm against the knot. Immediately, a shrill wailing sound pierced the air.

In just a matter of seconds, the once tranquil gardens were swarmed with teachers and security staff. Oliver saw Doctor Zibblatt amongst them, and Coach Finkle. There were also many guards, the Seers who dedicated themselves to defending the school.

Professor Amethyst emerged from the crowd. “Esther. Oliver. Get back. Leave this to us.”

Esther didn’t need telling twice. She let her shield down and slumped forward with exhaustion. Oliver caught her in his arms.

“Esther!” he exclaimed, alarmed.

“She’ll be okay,” Professor Amethyst assured Oliver. “She’s just drained herself by using up all her powers. Just get her to

safety.”

Oliver nodded with determination. He slung Esther’s arm around his shoulder and heaved her up to standing. She had just enough strength left to support her weight, but she leaned heavily against him as they hurried through the grass and along the path.

When they reached the open door to the gardens, Oliver saw yet more guards holding back crowds of students craning their necks to see what was going on.

Oliver took a quick glance over his shoulder. Immediately, he wished he had not. An epic battle was taking place in the once beautiful gardens. The bats were transforming into humans. Their eyes flashed blue.

Then the guards reached inside and bundled Oliver and Esther out of the garden, blocking their view. But Oliver had seen enough to know that this was what Professor Amethyst had warned him of. Their enemies. Rogue Seers. Somehow, they had penetrated the School for Seers. They were under attack.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Oliver helped Esther to the bench under the kapok tree. She slumped down, her head hanging forward. Oliver sat beside her and secured his arm around her waist.

The whole atrium was full of confused students, their expressions ranging from shocked to terrified. The shrill alarm continued blaring.

“Oliver!” a voice called.

He looked up and saw Hazel running across the atrium toward him. Behind her followed Simon, Walter, and Ralph.

“What’s going on?” Ralph asked when they reached him. “Are you okay?”

“Oh no, Esther!” Hazel cried, her eyes round with fear. She crouched down to tend to Esther, tenderly wiping stray tendrils of hair from her face.

“We’re fine,” Oliver said. “The school is under attack from rogue Seers.”

Everyone gasped.

“We’ll be okay,” Oliver reassured them. “Professor Amethyst and the guards are dealing with it now.”

He tried to make himself sound confident and ignored the shiver that ran through his body as he recalled the eerie blue eyes of the rogues.

Hazel looked up from her crouched position. “What happened

to Esther?”

“She drained her powers,” Oliver said. “She made a shield to hold back the attackers. She saved us. It was awesome.”

Esther raised her head slightly and allowed herself a timid smile. Then she croaked, “Not exactly the way I was expecting our date to go.”

Just then, the alarm shut off. The hubbub of the students in the atrium ceased immediately. Everyone turned to look at the door of the garden.

Professor Amethyst came striding out. The guards and teachers, including Doctor Zibblatt, Coach Finkle, and Mr. Lazzarato, followed him. All eyes watched with rapt attention.

“School meeting,” Professor Amethyst announced. “Now.”

No one needed telling twice. The entire school scurried toward a door Oliver had not yet entered. It was marked with a letter D, and the light glowed softly to indicate they could all enter.

Oliver and Hazel helped Esther to her feet. Although she was considerably more stable now, they supported her between them as they shuffled toward the D door. The three others followed behind.

“The D is for debate or discussion,” Ralph explained, defaulting to his teacher-mode. “Although I don’t think there’ll be much in the way of discussion going on today.”

As they entered the atrium, Oliver glanced about him. It felt like a cathedral, with large pews in a horseshoe shape and a

stage in the middle upon which Professor Amethyst stood. The atmosphere was solemn and foreboding.

They took their seats. Not a moment later, Professor Amethyst began to speak.

“Rogue Seers,” he announced, projecting his voice across the vast expanse. It was met by rapt silence from the onlookers. “Those who have turned to the dark side.”

There was a collective gasp, followed by murmuring and hubbub. The head teacher cast his eyes downward. He looked ashamed, Oliver thought, as if he perceived the Seers turning rogue as a personal failure. It made his own determination to stay on the right path grow even stronger.

“They were trying to steal the Orb of Kandra,” Professor Amethyst continued. “In order to destroy the school. The crisis was averted thanks to our fearless security personnel and teachers. That, and the actions of our brave students sounding the alarm.”

He looked directly at Oliver and Esther. Oliver squirmed in his seat.

The headmaster continued. “I have sealed the tear in the invisible wall that protects us. But we’re not out of danger yet. For the rogues to have even found the school to enter in the first place, they must have been aided. I fear that amongst our midst there is a traitor. A spy.”

There was another large gasp. Oliver looked over at his friends. Ralph in particular looked very troubled at the news.

Simon had turned an even paler shade of white. Esther grabbed Oliver's hand for comfort and Oliver squeezed it reassuringly.

"Your timetables will be disabled for the next forty-eight hours," Professor Amethyst added. "To give the faculty and myself time to strategize. I'd like everyone to rest, eat healthy meals, and get lots of sleep. Normal classes and schedules will resume in two days' time."

Oliver checked his timetable and saw that it was completely grayed out, with no coordinates or ticking clock. For the first time since coming here, his every move was no longer predetermined. It left him feeling strangely unmoored.

With the announcement over, everyone filed out of the atrium and headed toward the F hall. Esther was now more or less back to normal, but Oliver hung closely by her side just in case. Everyone was silent and solemn as they clipped into a table.

The table rose and clicked into place. The food chutes moved into place, displaying a vast array of colorful foods. No one took anything. They were all too stunned. Finally, Simon broke the silence.

"I know I ought not admit this," he said, "but I for one am rather scared."

"Me too," Hazel agreed with a nod.

"It was too close a call," Ralph commented. "For people to penetrate the invisible wall. It makes me feel very unsafe. What if they come back?"

"Do you think the school is still in danger?" Simon asked.

“Professor Amethyst said he closed the rip,” Hazel reminded him.

“But he also said there was a spy!” Walter exclaimed.

Oliver listened to his friends discuss the situation, but remained very quiet. The attack had sent his mind reeling. As he looked at the faces of his friends, he could tell that everything had changed. The attack had stolen everyone’s innocence and sense of wonder, replacing it with heavy reality, with the weight of their collective missions. But it wasn’t all doom and gloom. Esther sat amongst them now as a new friend.

A girlfriend? Oliver wondered.

He didn’t know how to define their relationship but he was very glad to have her by his side.

The group of friends picked at their food. No one was hungry and barely a morsel had been eaten between them when the motorized arms came to collect their dishes. Then the table descended and everyone left the F hall.

They didn’t even need to say aloud where they were heading. They all made a beeline straight to the Z atrium. It was flashing white to allow the students to enter freely, as per Professor Amethyst’s instructions for them to get lots of sleep. Oliver was grateful. He was exhausted.

Ichiro was on duty, his usual smile replaced by a sort of heavy weariness. He showed each of them into their sleep pods without any joking quips.

Oliver attached his wires and monitors quickly. He couldn’t

get to sleep soon enough. He wanted to put the terrors of the day out of his mind. So as soon as he was wired up, he pressed the white button and fell into a deep, instantaneous sleep.

*

Oliver found himself standing on the edge of a tall building. Though he'd never seen the School for Seers from the outside, he instinctively knew that that was where he was standing. He could see the shimmering bubble-like barrier of the protective shield arcing all around the building, encompassing the vast green fields of the school grounds that stretched on.

Just then, something in the distance caught Oliver's eye. There was movement. Some kind of dark shape was bobbing on the horizon.

Oliver squinted and tried to decipher what he was seeing. The shape seemed to be bobbing, up then down, over and over. With a gasp, Oliver realized what he was looking at. An army. One hundred men strong. The strange movement was their perfect march.

Oliver gasped. The army was heading straight for the school! As they drew closer he could make out more details. Their uniforms were a dusky khaki color, reminiscent of the uniforms worn by soldiers in World War Two. And they were maneuvering something along with them, some kind of weapon on a metal gurney with wheels. It looked like a rocket, with a strange egg-

shaped body and wires protruding from it. Oliver recognized it instantly. The first atomic bomb. He'd seen its image in his inventors book.

The army reached the shimmering boundary of the school's protective wall and stopped in one sudden, uniform motion. Oliver watched on in stunned silence as they began to adjust the bomb, angling it toward the wall.

"They're going to blow up the school," he stammered aloud.

Just then, a single figure broke from the line of soldiers. He walked up to the bomb, held his hand over the button, then paused and turned to look up at Oliver.

Oliver let out a desperate scream of realization. He knew that face all too well.

It was Lucas.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Oliver awoke with a gasp. The dream bounced around in his mind. Had it just been a dream? Or a premonition? Oliver's dreams had guided him before, so why not this one?

Frantically, he mulled it over in his mind, trying to make sense of the idea that Lucas had been behind the attack on the school, that he was sending an army to finish the job. Why would he want to destroy the School for Seers? How did he even know about it in the first place? He wasn't a guide like Armando, nor a Seer.

In a flash, Oliver remembered his conversation with Professor Amethyst in the sixth dimension. The headmaster had told him of rogue Seers who aided the most evil people in humanity. Could Lucas be one such person? Not just bad but... evil? Was that why he'd seen him leading an army?

Whatever the reason, Oliver knew he had to act. And fast. The visions he had when he closed his eyes at night were more than just dreams, they were premonitions. Armando's death. The rainbow mantis shrimp. The universe was guiding him.

Suddenly, Oliver heard a voice ring out inside his mind. It was Ms. Belfry's, telling him to always follow his dreams. Oliver wondered now if she'd meant literally, if there was something she knew about him.

Whether she did or not, her words coming to him in this moment seemed like a rallying cry, like another sign from the

universe to guide him on his journey.

There was no time to waste. Oliver had to foil Lucas's plan, stop him in his tracks in order to protect the school. He had to leave and return to the factory.

As he felt his pod moving beneath him, he tore off the monitors and wires, willing it to move faster, to free him quicker.

Finally, it clicked into place. The lid hissed open and Ichiro's smiling face appeared above him.

"Hi, Oliver," he began.

But Oliver was on his feet in an instant.

"Sorry, Ichiro! No time to explain!" he cried.

He hurried for the airlock. Inside, he went straight up to the locker, pulling out his freshly laundered clothes. He changed quickly in the changing room. As he hurried out, he slammed straight into Hazel.

"Oof!" she cried, stepping back. "Are you okay, Oliver? What's the hurry?"

"I'm fine," Oliver stammered, barely making eye contact. He gazed at the door, desperate for the white light to allow him to leave. "I just have to... I have things to do."

He went to move past her, but Hazel took a step to block him. She fixed her concerned, gray eyes on him.

"Oliver, what's wrong?" she said, more insistent this time.

Just then, Ralph emerged from the changing room. He took a second to survey Hazel and Oliver before him, then quirked his head to the side. "What's going on, guys?"

Oliver's mind was reeling too much to get his thoughts in order. "I have to stop him."

Ralph and Hazel exchanged a confused glance.

"Stop who?" Ralph asked.

Oliver's mind was frantic. He paced away from them only to find his route blocked by Walter, Simon, and Esther coming out from behind the changing curtains and into the main airlock.

"You guys okay?" Walter asked, looking bemused.

"Crumbs, I do hope you're not having a barney," Simon said.

"It's Oliver," Hazel told them. "He's had a bad dream or something."

"Not a dream," Oliver explained. "A vision or a premonition or something. I've had them before. I know who attacked the school."

Esther gasped. She grabbed Oliver's elbow and steered him through the door—its light now glowing red—and out to the benches beneath the kapok. Everyone followed, crowding around Oliver.

"Who attacked the school?" Esther asked him.

"Lucas," Oliver stammered. "The man who killed my guide. He was behind the attack and he's planning another. With an army, this time, and a bomb. I need to get back to Armando's factory. I need to stop him."

"How do you know all this?" Hazel asked. She looked very confused.

"I saw it in my dream!" Oliver exclaimed. He didn't have time

for this. He needed to leave. Now.

He tried to shove his way through the group, but they butted their shoulders together, preventing him from getting past. Hazel looked perturbed. Simon, Walter, and Esther gave each other worried looks.

“You’re not leaving the school,” Ralph told him sternly, “and risking expulsion just because of a *dream*.”

He pushed down on Oliver’s shoulders, forcing him to sit. Oliver relented, sinking to the bench with a huge exhalation. He felt like the wind had been knocked right out of him.

“It wasn’t just a dream,” Oliver said. “It was a premonition. I’ve had them before.”

Esther took a seat beside Oliver. She rested her hand gently on Oliver’s arm. It was comforting.

“Start at the beginning,” she said, softly.

Oliver felt some of the tension in his body release. “I dreamt that Armando died. Then he did. Now the man I think killed him is trying to destroy the school.”

His thoughts were so jumbled it was almost impossible to articulate them in ways his friends could comprehend.

“And you know this because of a dream?” Hazel asked, folding her arms, looking down at him.

“Yes,” Oliver said tersely.

“This is crazy,” Walter said.

“Absolutely ludicrous,” Simon added.

“You can’t leave the school,” Ralph implored.

Oliver grew increasingly exasperated. Why wouldn't his friends just believe him?

Esther hushed everyone. "Ralph's right," she said diplomatically. "Even if you wanted to leave, you wouldn't be able to. Your timetable won't let you."

Oliver grabbed his timetable and waved it. "No schedule," he said. "Professor Amethyst switched them off, remember? It's another sign from the universe."

No one looked convinced.

"I need to go and now's the time to do it," Oliver added with determination.

"But we need you here," Esther said, her voice sounding pained. "To protect the school."

Oliver felt his heart clench at the thought of Esther feeling scared and vulnerable without him there.

"Can't you see?" Oliver said. "The only way I can protect the school is by leaving."

"But what if there's another attack from the inside?" Esther asked.

"Then you'll fight them," he said. "I've seen how strong you are."

But Ralph was having none of it. He folded his arms, looking down at Oliver like a bossy teacher.

"No way," he said. "This is not happening. Timetabled or otherwise, Professor Amethyst won't let you leave the school."

"Professor Amethyst doesn't need to know."

“If he finds out you’re planning on following your own path then he’ll expel you.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes. He wasn’t stupid. He knew leaving the school wasn’t allowed. It wasn’t something to do lightly or on a whim. He could be trapped outside forever, at a huge personal sacrifice. But it was a risk he felt compelled to make.

“Then let’s make sure he doesn’t find out,” Oliver said with a warning tone in his voice.

Ralph looked shocked by his tone.

“How are you planning to stop Lucas?” Esther asked. “You have nothing to guide you but your instinct. No timetable to warn you if you go off course. You’d be blind.”

“I don’t know yet. But the universe is guiding me. I can’t *not* follow her lead.”

Oliver looked from one skeptical face to the next. His frustration magnified. They didn’t believe him. Didn’t trust him. Whatever he had to do to stop Lucas and save the school, he was going to have to do it alone.

Just then, the sound of footsteps caught everyone’s attention. The group stepped back and through the clearing between their bodies Oliver saw a figure moving away. It was unmistakably Edmund.

“Oh no!” he cried, jumping up. “Edmund overheard us. I bet he’ll tell Professor Amethyst. How will I get out now? He’ll be watching me like a hawk!”

Oliver realized then that leaving the School for Seers was

going to be even harder than he'd bargained for. Not only were his friends not on his side, but now his enemy knew what he was planning. He would have to formulate an escape plan and keep it to himself. It was the only way he'd be able to leave and stop Lucas. But that only made things feel even more tense for Oliver. He'd figured stopping Lucas would be hard enough without the added hurdle of escaping from the school.

"Maybe," Esther said gently, "*that's* the real sign from the universe. Maybe she's telling you not to leave."

Oliver looked at her twinkling eyes. He didn't want to lie to Esther, but nothing could change his mind. He was going to come up with a plan to leave and he was going to do it without them. Whatever plan he came up with it would have to be failsafe. He had one shot at this.

"You're right," he replied, sighing heavily to mask the awkwardness of his lie. "Sorry, guys, I just freaked out, I guess."

Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief.

"So you're not leaving?" Hazel confirmed.

Oliver shook his head.

"Good," Ralph said, sounding relieved. "Now let's get some breakfast and put that whole thing behind us."

Oliver followed everyone toward the F atrium. Little did they know...

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Oliver kept a low profile all day, silently plotting his plan of escape, pretending to his friends he'd put the silly dream out of his head. He knew he only had one chance to leave—while the timetables were switched off—and decided his best bet would be while everyone was in their sleep pods. He just had to make them think he was going to bed, then he could escape.

As the day drew to a close, Oliver walked along with his friends toward the Z atrium. The letter on the door glowed white and they went inside the first airlock door.

As they headed to the lockers to collect their sleep suits Oliver kept his overalls on him. There was no way he was saving the world wearing a strange white sleeper suit.

He changed quickly and stuffed his overalls into the front of his suit, then hurried out to the lockers, pretending to deposit his clothes inside a locker in case anyone noticed. Just as he closed the locker door, Esther reemerged in her own sleep suit. Oliver turned abruptly, trying to hide any signs of guilt from his face. Esther did not seem to notice that anything was amiss and went about putting her clothes into one of the lockers.

The rest of Oliver's friends congregated in the changing room, then headed through the airlock door into the area with the sleep pods. Oliver had never seen the sleeping atrium so filled up. Every student must be sleeping right now, as per Professor

Amethyst's instructions. Ichiro wasn't even there to show them into their pods. It was another stroke of luck for Oliver; it would be easier to sneak away without Ichiro awake.

One by one, Oliver's friends got into a sleep pod and whooshed off into the blackness. With each one, Oliver felt a stab of grief knowing it may be the last time he ever saw them. He wished he could tell them what they meant to him but there was no way without them guessing immediately that he was still planning on leaving.

He hung at the back, hoping that he could be last and avoid getting into a pod. But Esther was standing a little farther behind than he was.

"After you," he said to her when the next pod moved into place. His voice cracked with emotion at the thought these may be the last words they exchanged.

"You first," Esther replied, smiling sweetly.

There was no way out of it. Oliver took a last lingering glance at Esther's beautiful face in an attempt to sear it into his memory. Then he swallowed the lump of grief in his throat and turned away from her. He climbed into the pod and pulled the lid into place, staring up at the frosted glass, trying not to dwell on his loss but focus, instead, on the task at hand.

The pod began to move into place. Oliver hoped it wouldn't travel too far into the air. He didn't feel like risking breaking his ankles at the first hurdle.

As soon as the movement stopped, he pried open the lid of

his pod. To his frustration, he discovered his pod was, indeed, floating miles from the ground, right near the top of the atrium.

He pushed the lid fully open and quickly changed from the sleep suit back into his overalls, maneuvering in the pod awkwardly. Once he was dressed, he stood, feeling the pod sway unstably beneath him.

Each of the pods was connected to a thick cable. Oliver clung to his as he squinted through the darkness, trying to map out a route down to the ground using the pods like stepping stones. It was a long, long way down; he'd need to use at least twenty pods in his descent.

Oliver inched along the lid of his pod and reached for the cable of the next one along. He grabbed it and stepped from one pod to the next, feeling them wobbling as he transferred his weight from one to the next. His heart flew into his mouth. But soon the pod stabilized.

Oliver inched along to the next. It was a bigger jump down than the last. He stretched across, one hand gripping the cable of the pod he was on, the other reaching for the next cable. But he couldn't quite get his fingers on the next cable. He stretched and stretched and went up onto his tiptoes to get an extra inch of length but it was no use. He just couldn't reach.

As Oliver searched around him for an alternative route, he suddenly lost his footing. He slipped, his stomach crashing onto the lid of the pod. Then he began to slide across its sleek surface.

Oliver groped forward for the cable. He managed to get hold

of it, but he was still sliding, and the cable ran painfully through his sore hands, making him wince.

The sliding stopped suddenly, and Oliver was left dangling over the edge of the swaying pod. For a moment, he clung onto the cable. But then he lost his grip on that, too, and began to tumble through the air.

There was no time to think. In an instant, Oliver summoned his powers, recalling the way he'd changed his own body in the switchit hall. Could he do it again?

As he fell through the air he visualized his body becoming bouncy, as if he had springs in his legs instead of bones. The ground was coming up fast to meet him. If it didn't work he'd be toast for sure.

Oliver hit the ground and felt his legs taking the force like pogo sticks. They bent all the way down then bounced back up, ping-ponging him several feet upward.

It had worked!

Oliver landed a second time, this time without the bounce back. He paused for a moment to catch his breath, relieved and a little surprised to still be in one piece. Then he hurried through the darkness toward the airlock.

But just as he reached the changing room door, a figure loomed up ahead of him, blocking his exit. Oliver staggered back and found himself staring into the eyes of Edmund.

"What are you doing?" Oliver gasped, taking another step back.

But it was no good. There was no getting space from Edmund. The bully grabbed Oliver and threw him to the ground. They tussled, Oliver managing to roll them over so that Edmund was beneath him. But as soon as he attempted to stand, Edmund kicked out, swiping Oliver's legs from beneath him. He fell, and Edmund grabbed him again, rolling them both so that he was back on top. He glared down at Oliver, his angry face framed by a backdrop of floating white pods against black velvet.

"What's your problem?" Oliver hissed through gritted teeth as he attempted to get Edmund's hands off him.

"I knew you'd go against Professor Amethyst's directions," Edmund said. "So I stayed up to stop you."

He pushed hard into Oliver's shoulders, pinning him to the ground. Oliver writhed against the force of him, wriggling his body side to side in an attempt to break free. It was futile. He was completely immobilized.

"You were waiting for me?" Oliver said. "Why? Why are you so determined to stop me?"

Somewhere deep inside, Oliver could feel his powers beginning to swell. He fought to control them. It was like a fight or flight response; instinctual.

Edmund ignored Oliver's question. He pushed Oliver's shoulders harder against the ground. Oliver winced from the pain.

Oliver gasped as a horrible thought struck him. "Are you the traitor?"

Edmund cackled loudly. “You’re even stupider than I thought. I’m no traitor. I love this school. It’s just you I hate.”

“Why?” Oliver asked, pained. “I’ve never done anything to you.”

They kept tussling. Edmund had the upper hand. His physical strength was greater than Oliver’s. But Oliver’s powers were stronger. Too strong. Oliver fought against them as they grew within him. He didn’t want to hurt Edmund again.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Edmund sneered.

Suddenly, movement from above caught Oliver’s eye. Someone else was hopping along the sleep pods, using them as stepping stones to the ground. Their movements were ballet-like, almost effortless. Oliver realized it was Esther.

At the sight of her, something fell into place in his mind. Edmund liked Esther, too. This whole rivalry between them had just been because of Esther.

Oliver saw Esther reach the final pod and hop down to the ground. Then she darted across the floor toward them.

“Get off him, Edmund,” her voice echoed across the space.

Edmund flinched and looked over his shoulder.

It gave Oliver the second he needed. He pushed out with his arms, shoving Edmund back. At the same time, he brought his knees up to his chest and kicked out like a kangaroo. Without needing to use his powers, Oliver managed to push Edmund all the way off him. The bully rolled away and hit the floor with an *oof*. Oliver leapt up to his feet.

“I’m going to tell Professor Amethyst what you’re doing!” Edmund cried from his heap on the floor.

He stood quickly and went to charge at Oliver. But at the same time, Esther projected out one of her shields. Edmund slammed into the barrier, his voice completely cut off. On the other side, he was still yelling but Oliver couldn’t hear his words. He banged on the invisible barrier, growing increasingly angry.

Oliver looked over at Esther. She was poised, her focus on the shield she was projecting.

“How did you know I’d try to leave?” Oliver asked her.

“I can read you pretty easily,” Esther said. “That and the fact you didn’t put your overalls in the locker.”

So much for getting away with it, Oliver thought.

“But why are you helping me?” he asked. “I thought you were against me leaving.”

“I trust you, Oliver,” Esther replied earnestly. “I saw what you did during switchit, you know, how you changed your hands into steel. That’s such advanced stuff. You must be very powerful to do it. So I should trust that you know what you’re doing.”

Her support meant the world to him.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Then he looked back at Edmund. “What do we do about him?”

Esther smiled. “I have an idea.”

She let her shield drop. Immediately, Edmund charged at Oliver.

“Duck!” Esther cried.

Oliver leaped to the side out of Edmund's way. Edmund tripped, falling to his knees. Then Esther spun, forcing out one of her pulsating sonar shields. It acted like a wave, pushing Edmund across the floor in the direction of the sleep pods.

There was an open one in place. Oliver immediately realized what Esther was attempting to do. He hurried after Edmund and reached him just as another one of Esther's wave surges pushed him into the open pod. Before he even had a chance to sit up, Oliver pressed his arm across Edmund's chest, pinning him in place. With his spare hand, he grabbed the white wires and stuck the pads to Edmund's temples.

"Get off me!" Edmund cried angrily.

He shoved at Oliver's arm, but Oliver held firm. Then Esther appeared by Oliver's side. She reached inside the pod and pressed the white button.

"NO!" Edmund cried, realizing too late what was happening.

A split second later, Edmund fell into a deep, unconscious sleep.

Esther slammed the lid down and pushed the button that sent the pod floating off into the atrium. She waved as it flew away.

"Sleep well, Edmund."

Oliver turned to her. "That was awesome!" he said.

Esther smiled. But the moment was bittersweet. Because Oliver knew that now he really had to say goodbye. He had to leave her, possibly forever.

"Esther... I..." he began, his voice cracking.

But Esther just shook her head. “Save the goodbyes for later,” she told him, sternly. “First we have to get you out of this place.”

Oliver’s eyes widened. “You mean you’ll help me escape?”

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “You didn’t really think you’d be able to get out on your own, did you? Come on. Let’s go.”

They ran across the atrium and hurried through the airlock, then emerged out into the main atrium. It was pitch-black and completely silent. The only light source came from the very top floor.

“The teachers must be in the sixth dimension,” Oliver whispered to Esther.

“We’ll have to sneak past them,” Esther said.

They got into the elevator and rode it to the top floor. Then they stepped out onto the walkway and scurried across it until they reached the bouncy netting and the slide that led up from it.

Oliver peered up. The slide was so long he couldn’t see the top. The sides were completely smooth, with not a single ridge to use as a foothold. Climbing it would be impossible.

“Now what?” Esther whispered.

It was their only way out of the school. Oliver realized that he’d have to use his powers.

“I have an idea,” he told her.

Oliver closed his eyes to help calm his mind. He summoned his powers then visualized his hands turning into suckers. As he unfocused his grip on reality, he forced the new image out in its

place. When he looked down, his hands had indeed transformed.

Esther blinked with shock. "What are those?"

"Suckers," Oliver said, waving them. "For climbing."

"Are you expecting me to hold on?" Esther asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Got any better ideas?" Oliver countered.

Esther sighed with reluctant acceptance. She jumped up on Oliver's back, clinging tightly to him. Oliver began to climb up the inside of the slide.

It was hard going, both physically on his limbs and mentally holding onto the reality of his suckered hands. It was made even harder going by the extra weight of Esther. She was gripping on so tightly around his neck that it was making it difficult for him to breathe.

"Esther," he croaked. "You're strangling me."

"Sorry," she said, barely loosening her hold.

Oliver climbed on.

A moment later, Esther whispered in his ear. "I hope you know this doesn't count as our second date."

Oliver felt his lips twitch at the side. "No. We'll go on a real one when I get back."

They both fell into tense silence. There was no guarantee Oliver would ever make it back.

At last they reached the top of the slide. They clambered out, emerging into the narrow corridor. Oliver remembered following Ralph along it on his arrival at the school and felt a pang of grief

for his absent friend. At least he had Esther by his side. For now, anyway.

They headed along on hands and knees until the ceiling was high enough for them to stand. Then they hurried along the corridors, following the winding paths to the main door.

They halted. This was where Professor Amethyst's invisible wall was.

Oliver reached out and touched its surface. It felt like a bubble, like elastic resisting him. He pushed and felt it push back. Just as he suspected, it was impenetrable. He looked over at Esther.

She was gazing at the empty space. She reached forward with her fingertips and caressed the air.

"It feels just like one of mine," she said.

"Do you think it's made the same way?" he asked. "Through waves?"

Esther nodded. "I do."

"How will I get through?" Oliver lamented.

"I think I might be able to make an opening," Esther said. "Using my own specialism to counter it."

Oliver's eyes widened. "And you thought sonar was the worst?"

Esther smiled coyly.

Oliver watched as she shifted her mind into the place needed to summon her powers.

"Whoa," she stammered, beads of sweat appearing instantly on her brow. "This is not going to be easy."

She reached out with her hands. It looked like she was trying to pry apart two magnets, or rip fabric in half with her bare hands.

“I’m not strong enough to open this on my own,” she told him.

“Let me help,” Oliver said.

He summoned his own powers, this time transforming one of his hands into a crowbar. He reached forward, finding the gap Esther had managed to rip through the shield, and wrenched it further open. The resistance was powerful, but they kept at it, working together until they’d made a space big enough for Oliver to squeeze through.

“There,” Esther said, stepping back.

But the moment she let go, the gap instantly sealed up.

Esther looked over at Oliver, realization dawning on her face, turning her skin pallid.

“The shield is so strong it can heal itself,” she said. “It won’t stay open.”

Oliver let out a heavy exhalation. “Once I’m through, I’ll be trapped the other side.”

Esther shook her head vigorously as if the idea of Oliver being trapped the other side was inconceivable to her. “I’m just going to have to hold it open until you get back.”

“You can’t,” Oliver said. “It will drain you.”

“I’m strong,” Esther countered. “You said so yourself.”

Oliver shook his head. “It’s too huge an undertaking. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking,” she argued. “I’m offering.”

Oliver took her by the shoulders. “Then I don’t accept your help.”

Esther remained fiercely stubborn. “I’m going to do it anyway, with your permission or without it.”

Oliver sighed with frustration. “I don’t want you to risk your health for me.”

“And I don’t want you to have no chance of getting back. I can do it.” She gave him a decisive nod. “I am doing it.”

Oliver realized there was no arguing. Esther was not backing down.

“Okay,” he relented. “But only while the timetables are off. Once they’re back online tomorrow you’ll be out of bounds. You could make the dimension unstable.”

Esther looked distraught as she grappled with the reality of their situation. “Professor Amethyst said they’d come back on after forty-eight hours. That gives you less than eight hours.”

Oliver nodded gravely. He understood the stakes.

They turned back to the wall, both silent as they worked together to create a new opening. Esther ripped a seam through which Oliver used his crowbar hand to wrench it apart. Then Esther adjusted her position so that she’d be able to keep the sides of the opening apart. Oliver could see the strain on her already.

“Esther,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes I do,” she replied. Then she looked over briefly, her beautiful emerald eyes glittering with tears. “GO.”

Oliver didn't waste any time. He squeezed through the opening, feeling a strange coldness pass through his whole body. Once on the other side, he looked back, searching for Esther. But, of course, she was now concealed by the invisible wall.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Suddenly, Oliver heard a honk. He turned sharply. A taxi was careening toward him.

His heart pounded as he jumped back, landing on a sidewalk. He was just in time. The car whizzed past him.

But as Oliver watched it go, he noticed it wasn't a taxi at all. It was a police car, with a little sign on top and the word *sheriff* emblazoned across its side. It had a strange rounded black body and large shiny fenders. It was an old-fashioned wartime police car.

Oliver knew then, without a doubt, that he was back in the past. He was back in 1944.

Oliver looked about him. The streets of 1944 New Jersey were exactly as he'd left them when he'd followed Ralph into the School for Seers. He'd come out at the exact same point he'd gone in. He even recognized the same children playing hoop and ball in the playground, the same smartly dressed men driving shiny black cars. It was as if time itself had been paused while he'd been inside the school, as if a second out here had been a day in there.

It was an unsettling thought but Oliver didn't find it all that surprising, considering the fact the school existed outside of time. But it meant the amount of time he had to stop Lucas before Esther lost hold of the tear in the wall could be even less than the

eight hours he'd anticipated.

Oliver hurried onward, heading in the direction of Illstrom's Inventions. Without Ralph to guide him, he had to navigate the streets himself, a task that amplified how very alone he felt without his friends. They'd become his companions now and he desperately wished they could be by his side. He wondered what would happen if they all awoke before he returned, and what Esther would tell them about helping him escape. And more importantly, what Professor Amethyst would do when he discovered Oliver had left. Would he expel him? Even if Oliver survived this ordeal and made it back to the school alive, would he even be allowed back in?

He ran on, passing the housing estates and munitions factories, the workers and civilians going about their lives under the shadow of war. He could sense it in the air, that tense feeling of disaster waiting around every corner. Living during a time when the world was at war must have been terrifying, and Oliver felt supremely grateful for the safe and peaceful days he'd spent at the School for Seers. He'd needed them; his next task would test him to his limits.

At last the factory loomed into view. Oliver felt a chill run through his spine. Even with its shiny new 1940s appearance, the factory looked like home to him. To think of it in mortal peril made Oliver feel sick to the stomach.

He headed toward it, struck once again by how vibrant it was, with a steady stream of workers filing in and out of the big main

doors, wearing the same blue overalls as Oliver.

The same overalls! Oliver thought, realizing that he would blend right in.

He rushed for a group of workers heading from the bus stop to the factory, and muscled his way into the middle of them. As though he were a chameleon, none of them seemed to notice his intrusion. And so he was swept along with the group, right up the steps and in through the double doors of Illstrom's Inventions.

Now inside the factory, Oliver was struck once more by how alive the place was in 1944, with so many workers and machines, so much noise and commotion. He gasped in awe at how shiny the machines looked, as if they were made from gold instead of brass. And the floor was so open without Armando's fake walls or labyrinth of corridors concealing secret rooms. In this era, he'd not yet lost funding for the factory, the result of which was his construction of fake walls and secret passageways to keep invaders out. This was the factory's heyday, fully funded, when Armando had been on the cusp of inventing incredible things. There'd been so much promise back then, so much excitement. It seemed to permeate the air.

Just then, the crowd of workers who had been concealing Oliver began to disperse. They started heading out in different directions to their various projects, leaving Oliver floundering in the middle of the open-plan floor. He had to find Armando before the guards noticed him and kicked him out.

He gazed around, searching for Armando. The inventor had

been at his workbench when Oliver had last been here, but had since moved on. Oliver deduced that the amount of time that had passed out here while he'd been in the School for Seers was only around a few minutes. A few minutes to several days. But if that were true, his timetable should have come back online by now. Could it be that time had switched when he stepped outside of the school, with it now running more slowly there than here? He clung to that slim possibility. Perhaps there was still a chance he could stop Lucas before Esther's strength failed.

As he scanned the factory floor, Oliver suddenly became aware of the feeling of eyes on him. He turned sharply. The young Lucas was watching him like a hawk from the other side of the factory. Knowing what he now did about the man he'd become, Oliver felt more uneasy under his penetrating glare than ever before. Even in his youthful form, Lucas had a nasty expression on his face, like he'd sucked a sour lemon. He wondered what made him so bitter.

Oliver knew that Lucas would call the guards on him again, just like he had done the last time he'd intruded on the factory. He turned and hurried off, trying to work out where the back rooms of the factory could be reached from. He weaved his way into groups of workmen, trying to get lost within the hubbub.

But suddenly he smacked into someone. Lucas. The evil-looking boy glared into Oliver's eyes.

"Back so soon?" Lucas growled. "I thought our guards made it clear that you're not welcome here. You must be wanting your

ears boxed to come straight back!”

Oliver didn't have time to deal with the young incarnation of Lucas, not when his elderly counterpart was going to destroy the school. But even as a boy, Lucas was testy and stubborn. He folded his arms and blocked Oliver's attempts to pass, looking just as hate-filled as the elderly man he would become. There seemed to be something dark within him, evident even at this young age.

Oliver tried to shove past Lucas. But the boy grabbed him roughly, pushing him backward.

“GUARDS!” Lucas yelled. “He came back! Seize him!”

From the other side of the factory, Oliver saw the two burly men spot him and leap into action. They looked furious as they barreled through the workers toward him.

He pushed Lucas's hands off of him and darted off the other direction. He whizzed across the factory floor, peering around large machines, rushing between workmen, ducking beneath their legs.

He leapt under a table, sliding across the ground on his knees before popping out the other side. Then he was on his feet again, racing to the next group of workmen, making his way across the factory floor in a strange zigzag dance. The corridor with the backrooms was just in sight. He was almost there. Just a few more feet to go.

Oliver burst out of the group and slammed straight into the chests of the two burly guards. They got hold of him and began

to drag him roughly to the exit.

“No, stop!” Oliver pleaded.

“We told you to get lost,” one barked gruffly.

“You don’t understand,” Oliver begged.

They ignored him, hauling him across the room. His view of the corridors grew more distant as he was pulled backward.

They reached the exit and one of the guards yanked the door open.

“Get out!” he shouted.

“And stay out!” the other yelled.

They threw him up and out of the door. Oliver flew through the air and landed hard on his behind. He groaned in pain. The doors slammed behind him.

Suddenly, Oliver felt a vibration coming from deep within his pocket. He grabbed his timetable and gasped. It was starting to come back online. Slowly, a single, weak light was beginning to blink to life.

Oliver realized he’d been right. The speed of time within the school and outside it had switched when he’d stepped over the threshold. More time passed here than there. But soon, more lights would switch on, and once the timetable was fully back online he’d be locked out of the School for Seers forever. He had to leave now if he stood any chance of returning to the school before his absence was noticed.

But he couldn’t, not while Lucas was at large.

Oliver clutched his timetable. The only thing he could be

certain of was that he had to stay, even if that meant sacrificing his school, his new life, and his friends. He had to find the bomb.

With a heavy weight pressing in his chest, Oliver slid his timetable back into his overalls pocket.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

There was no time to waste. Immediately, Oliver was back up on his feet. He skirted around the perimeter of the building, glad that the nettles and brambles he'd had to contend with in his own era had not yet grown. Another difference; in his era, the windows were boarded up, but not so here.

Oliver made his way around the back of the building and cautiously peered in through the first window. It seemed to be some kind of store cupboard, with mops and brooms inside. He headed on.

The next window showed a break room. Oliver ducked quickly when he saw there were workmen sitting around a table eating sandwiches.

He hurried on in his crouched position to the next window. This time he rose up very, very slowly. He peered inside. And there, sitting at his desk, blinking through the window at Oliver with bemusement, was Armando.

Oliver felt a flutter of relief to see him alive and well. But Armando, on the other hand, did not seem pleased to see Oliver. He strode over to the window and heaved it open.

“What are you doing?” he barked. “You’re trampling on private property.”

“It’s Lucas,” Oliver blurted out.

“My apprentice?” Armando asked, raising an eyebrow. “What

about him?”

“He’s building a bomb,” Oliver told him hurriedly.

“He’s just a boy!”

There was no time to explain that he meant a version of Lucas from the future, because Armando slammed the window shut and turned his back on Oliver.

Oliver felt the glass bump against his nose. He felt crushed. Armando didn’t believe him.

But he wasn’t giving up. He’d have to take some drastic action to prove to Armando he was someone worth listening to.

As the inventor went back to his schematics, Oliver took a steadying breath and shifted his mind into the place he needed in order to access his powers.

At once, he discovered it was remarkably harder to do so here than it had been at the School for Seers. He wondered if there’d been some kind of magical force field around the school that made it easier for the students to access their powers, extra training wheels just like Doctor Ziblatt’s goggles and Coach Finkle’s helmet.

But after a few more seconds, he felt his mind shift into place. A small ripple of relief went through him. It was harder to access his powers, yes, but not impossible. It took more effort than usual to conjure the image in his mind, and even more effort to push it outward into reality, but slowly and surely Oliver felt it begin to work. Sweat trickled down his forehead as he focused his attention on the items on Armando’s desk, pushing out a new

reality from his mind.

A ruler, pencil, compass, and protractor on the desk Armando was working at began to rise into the air. The inventor flinched back in his seat, leaping up to standing as the items hovered in the air before him.

Oliver kept his hold on the items, on their atoms, and started to pull them apart. Armando watched the scene unfold before his disbelieving eyes.

Slowly and with great effort, Oliver shifted the composition of the atoms in each item, turning them from solids into gas. Then, employing remarkable concentration, he began to rearrange them, turning the gas into a swirling gray cloud. He spelled out a message to Armando: *Let me in.*

Armando turned back over his shoulder, gazing at Oliver through the window. From his expression, it was clear that he was rattled. Oliver prayed that he'd done enough to get Armando to listen to him.

The inventor seemed frozen on the spot, as he looked from the message to Oliver and back again, his face a combination of confusion, curiosity, and fear. Then, in one sudden movement, he shook his head, turned on his heel, scooped some schematics off his desk, and marched out the door.

Instantly deflating, Oliver exhaled, letting go of his visualization. The ruler, pencil, compass, and protractor returned to their normal structures and clattered to the tabletop.

He bent over, grasping his knees, spent from the effort of using

his powers in the real world. He felt like he'd run a marathon. And it had all been in vain. Armando had refused to believe what was before his eyes.

He would have to find the bomb on his own.

From the outside, he grasped the bottom of the window and pulled it upward. He heaved himself up and crawled in through the open window, then plonked down onto the ground beneath it in a sprawled heap. He wished his powers were more easily accessed here; he could certainly do with some cushioning on his behind for all these tumbles he was taking. It would be black and blue before long.

He hurried out of the room and looked first left and then right down the corridor. It was empty.

Knowing that turning left would bring him back to the factory floor where the guards were positioned, Oliver headed right down the corridor.

He moved as quickly and quietly as possible. He reached a door and knelt down to peer in through the keyhole. It was just a storeroom. He moved on to the next door. This one stood ajar. But when Oliver peered inside, he just saw a room filled with wooden shelving and dusty old books.

Oliver went on and on, peering into each room he passed. Where could Lucas have hidden the bomb?

Finally, he reached the last room of the corridor. In the modern era, this room contained Armando's time machine and the door was a huge steel barricade. But not so here. In the past,

the door was wooden, just the same as the others.

Oliver tried the handle and it yielded. He looked inside. The disappointing sight of a room filled with old furniture awaited him.

Frustrated, Oliver closed the door and rested his back against it. His heart was hammering with nerves. Every second that passed felt like a second wasted, a second that he came closer to failing.

He searched his mind frantically, desperate for some kind of memory or clue to surface.

Suddenly, a thought struck Oliver. During the short time he'd been working alongside Lucas, he'd observed a peculiar tic in the old man; a place he often gravitated toward. It was nothing more than an alcove near the place his workbench was set up, but he would walk up to it several times a day, as though the spot brought him some kind of comfort. Oliver wondered, now, if the place had meaning to Lucas. It was worth a shot, since he'd hit a dead end.

Oliver hurried back along the corridor. He peered out to the main factory forecourt. It was still busy, with workmen hurrying all around the place, but the crowds had begun to thin out a little as the working day began to draw to an end. Oliver glanced over at the spot where Lucas's workbench was situated in the modern factory. Though there was no workbench in this era, the alcove was indeed there. Oliver had only one shot to reach it without being spotted.

He waited until a group of workers began heading for the door, obscuring him from the view of the guards. Then he ran as fast as he could and ducked into the alcove, out of sight.

Now here, Oliver wasn't sure what he was looking for. The wall appeared to be a straightforward wall. There was no trapdoor or anything beneath his feet. He felt around, touching the bricks in the wall. Then, suddenly, he felt the texture change beneath his fingertips.

At once, Oliver found that this particular brick was loose. He grappled with it, trying to hook his fingers beneath, and finally manage to wiggle it free. And there, behind the brick, was a lever.

Oliver didn't waste a second. He pulled the lever. Immediately, the wall clicked backward. Could it just be another of Armando's secret sections, hidden behind a fake wall? Or did something more sinister lurk the other side? Either way, there was only one way to find out. Oliver would have to enter.

He quickly glanced around the side of the alcove, looking at the nearly empty factory floor. The guards were busy ushering workers out the exit. While they were distracted, Oliver made his move. He pulled the fake wall fully open and slid quickly inside. Then he shut himself inside.

It was dark and smelled of dust. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Oliver noticed in front of him was a narrow, metal spiral staircase painted bright red. It looked familiar to him. He recalled the red staircase his in his own era, the one where Lucas's bedroom was located. Could it be that Lucas's room was

at the top of these stairs?

Oliver took a breath to steady his nerves. Then quietly tiptoeing, he began to ascend the stairs.

He went up and up for what felt like forever. When he finally emerged at the top, the ceiling was pointed. He must be right at the top of the factory, where there was an attic.

And there, ahead of him, was a door.

Oliver tried the handle. It was locked; a sure sign of secrecy.

Picking locks was a skill Oliver had perfected through the years of being Chris's brother. He'd lost count of the number of times his bully brother had locked him out of the house, forcing him to learn to jimmy the windows or pick the locks. He'd gotten pretty good at it. It had been awful at the time, but now Oliver could see it had all been good training.

He fiddled with it now and heard the lock click open. He tried the handle. This time it yielded. Oliver entered the attic.

Right away, a chill went through Oliver as it dawned on him where he was standing. This was Lucas's HQ.

By the desk at the window Oliver noticed notebooks and sketches.

He went over and studied the diagrams, trying to figure out what it was depicting. It was a large ovoid with a complex network of wires covering it and some kind of stabilizing base, like that of a rocket ship.

He turned the page to see a new design, a rework of the first. Then on the next page, yet more lines and shapes.

As he worked his way through the workbook, the feeling of anxiety built inside of him. The diagrams were becoming increasingly meticulous. No more did they look like the excited doodles of an imaginative mind. They were starting to look more and more like schematics: precise, ordered, and thorough. The handwriting was becoming neater, then shakier, as if the hand who'd written them had aged.

Dread crept up Oliver's gullet. The truth hit him. He was holding Lucas's finished designs.

This was the bomb.

But there was more to it than that. On the table were more documents. And they were not written in English.

Oliver had had language classes at school. He knew enough to know that the writing was in German. And his history classes had taught him that in 1944, the Germans were the enemies.

Oliver's heart began to beat rapidly. He quickly thumbed through the paperwork. It was as thick as a dossier, filled with written correspondences. He desperately wished he could read what was being communicated.

But when he reached the last page, he didn't need a translation to tell him how dangerous what he was holding in his hands really was. His heart clenched as he realized the last page was a contract, signed by Lucas. And there, stamped in the spot for the second signatory, was a swastika.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Oliver's head spun. Had Lucas sold his bomb to the Nazis?

Oliver noticed then that amidst the paperwork was a photo of Lucas. Not the young boy version of this timeline, but as the old man Oliver knew. And more chilling than seeing the elderly Lucas in the past where he did not belong was what he was wearing in the photo: a Nazi uniform.

The army in his dream. The uniforms matched!

Oliver drew back and gasped. But he had no time to let anything sink in, because suddenly he heard the sound of a revving engine. From the window, he saw a truck entering the shadowy lot of the factory. It drew to a halt and several men jumped out. They streaked across the courtyard. A small shadowy figure ushered them inside the factory. It was the young Lucas.

Oliver grabbed all the paperwork, shoving it hurriedly into his overall pockets. Then he darted out of the room, clattering down the spiral staircase.

He was just in the nick of time. The sound of heavy boots echoed down the corridor as Oliver backed into an alcove. He could hear whispering voices speaking in sharp, hurried German.

Up ahead, the exit stood open, letting in a sliver of moonlight. The men were coming out of another corridor. They were wheeling a large crate across the factory floor, heading for the

exit. Lucas was guiding them.

Oliver's heart clenched. Was the bomb inside the crate?

Just then, Oliver heard the sound of thudding coming from the other end of the corridor, quickly followed by a muffled cry. Armando. Lucas must have locked him in his office!

Oliver felt immediately torn between freeing Armando and following the crate. As the men maneuvered the crate through the exit, he stood on the spot, glancing first down the corridor toward the pounding sound, then back out at the exit.

Sorry, Armando, Oliver muttered under his breath.

He made his move, heading not toward his trapped hero, but streaking instead across the forecourt, following the bomb. He slunk discreetly through the door, letting the darkness of the moonlit evening provide cover.

Oliver ducked down behind a stack of trash cans and watched the scene unfold before him. It was happening so fast; the men loading up their truck with cargo taken from the factory. He had to do something.

Oliver closed his eyes, focusing his mind in the way he needed to, to summon his powers. But a sudden a noise beside him broke his concentration.

He turned sharply to see a silhouette emerging from the shadows. The first thing that struck Oliver was the unearthly shade of blue eyes. The eyes of a cobalt Seer. Of his enemy.

The shadowy figure moved further into the moonlight. Oliver gasped. It was Lucas.

Lucas was a Seer! But he was a rogue one, an evil one with unmistakable flashing blue eyes.

“What have you done?” Oliver cried to the boy.

Lucas just smirked. “He told me everything. The man from the future. About you and how you become Armando’s favorite. How you take my place. He said all I had to do to win back Armando’s favor was deliver this crate.”

All the pieces fell into place in Oliver’s mind. Lucas from the future had gotten young Lucas to do his bidding, to sell his bomb to the Nazis, the only people crazy enough to actually set it off.

“He tricked you!” Oliver cried. “Can’t you see? These men are German soldiers! That’s a bomb inside!”

Lucas frowned. “Don’t be stupid. The Germans are the enemies.”

“That man from the future,” Oliver stammered. “He’s YOU. He’s tricked you into handing a bomb over to Hitler!”

But Lucas wasn’t going to be convinced. There was no time to explain it either. Oliver had to stop the bomb from reaching its destination.

Thinking nothing of his own safety, he ran. But Lucas lunged for him. Oliver dodged, leaping left, and felt Lucas’s fingertips brush his overalls.

“Stop!” the boy screamed. “You’re ruining everything!”

Recovering, Oliver darted forward, his feet pounding the asphalt. His legs ached from the effort of sprinting. But Lucas was right behind him. So close.

The engine of the truck was already running. Fumes came from the exhaust. Oliver pounced through the acrid cloud, using all his strength to leap through the air.

He landed with a hard thump onto the back of the truck, his feet balancing precariously on a small ledge. He tried to open the door but it was locked. He felt the engine rumbling beneath him as the truck accelerated. Oliver held on tightly as the truck began to pull out of the lot. Pebbles crunched beneath the tires, just a foot below him.

Oliver clutched on with all his might, still trying to prize open the lock. Lucas was bearing down on him. But the truck was picking up speed. The distance between them grew.

Suddenly, the lock yielded. Oliver heaved the door of the truck open and swung his body inside. Wind whipped through his hair as he looked out the back of the open truck at Lucas's figure shrinking into the distance.

Oliver had no time to feel relieved. Lucas was a mere inconvenience, a small hurdle to overcome. The real challenge was the crate and the bomb it contained. He slammed the door shut behind him and turned to face it.

The truck picked up speed, surging forward and flinging Oliver backward. His back thudded against the closed doors. He sunk to his knees, winded. The truck jerked him roughly side to side, making his stomach flip. But he gritted his teeth and forced the unpleasant sensations away. He'd been on the back of an ostreagle, after all. This sensation was nothing in comparison

to that. Switchit practice had been good training, he realized.

Drawing himself to unsteady knees, Oliver staggered through the truck toward the crate that contained the weapon. He had to get inside somehow. He was certain that if he could get his hands on the machine, he'd work out a way to dismantle it.

Oliver took hold of one of the planks of wood in his hands. He heaved as hard as he could. But no success. The planks were fixed in place with nails. He'd need a wrench to get inside.

He looked around the truck frantically, searching for a tool that could help him in his endeavor. But the truck was moving too quickly. He kept getting tossed from side to side. Try as he might, he couldn't get to his feet long enough to fully search the inside of the truck for anything he may be able to use.

Suddenly, Oliver felt the sensation of moving upward. The truck was being driven up a ramp.

He ran to the back and looked out the small, blacked out window in the door. To his shock he saw that they had driven right up inside the back of a big military cargo plane!

With complete terror, Oliver realized what was happening. The truck containing the weapon was on its way to Nazi-controlled Germany. And he was going with it.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Oliver's heart hammered with terror. It was very noisy in the back of the plane with the engines roaring. It was also very dark. So dark, Oliver could hardly see his hands in front of his face.

He tried to collect his thoughts. But there was no time because Oliver suddenly felt the horrible swooshing sensation of the plane gaining speed along the runway. All around him, everything began to shake. There was nothing to hold on to, no seat to clip himself into. He was going to take to the sky in the back of a truck! Panic overcame him.

From beneath he felt the angle change. The plane was beginning to lift from the runway. Oliver started to slide backward and felt the strange heavy sensation of lift as the plane's wings countered the effects of gravity. He groped forward, searching for some kind of handhold. But there was nothing. He rolled, colliding with the back doors of the truck. There was nothing to do but close his eyes, grit his teeth, and wait for the plane's rapid ascension to be complete.

It seemed to last forever. The plane kept climbing and climbing, turning as it went in a sort of rollercoaster-like fashion. Unlike the passenger planes Oliver was used to, this military cargo plane had no need to make passengers comfortable, and the pilot was clearly pushing it to the very edge of its physical capabilities. Its steep angle remained, pushing Oliver into an

uncomfortable, sprawled position against the locked back doors of the truck. It must be ascending to a very high altitude, he realized, far, far above the clouds in order to avoid detection from the enemies below.

But finally, he felt it even out. At last, Oliver was able to collect himself.

He peeled himself from the uncomfortable position he'd been forced into against the back of the truck doors and heaved himself up on to unsteady legs. The plane was actually much smoother than it had been bumping around in the back of the truck.

Once more, he stood face to face with the crate. Inside was its dangerous cargo. The bomb. He had to get inside and destroy the bomb.

He searched around in the back of the truck, through the gloom, looking for some kind of tool to help him. Wedged amongst the other wooden boxes in the truck, he found a crowbar. He grabbed it, relieved.

Oliver hurried to the crate and squinted to find the nails. It was hard in the darkness to find the small glint of metal, but finally he did, and he worked quickly, prizing out the nails and discarding the planks to the side. He worked feverishly, the darkness making his task even harder. But one by one he managed to tear off the planks. Until, finally, he stepped back.

He was staring at the bomb.

Seeing it in reality was more bone-chilling than he'd ever

expected. This wasn't just a plan or design anymore. This was the real thing. The real bomb. A complex machine of burnished metal. Six feet tall. Egg-shaped. Covered in wires. Filled with deathly power.

Oliver shuddered at the thought of the twisted mind that had created it—Lucas. Oliver's determination to destroy the bomb before it could destroy anyone grew even stronger.

Quickly, he reached into his overalls pocket and pulled out all the plans he'd stolen from Lucas's secret room. It was so dark he had to hold them very close to his face. He studied them, comparing what was on the page to what he was looking at, trying to figure out how it had been designed and in turn, how it could be dismantled.

To his distress he found that it had been extremely well designed. Impeccably. Clearly, Lucas had poached ideas from Armando and twisted them for his dark means. The bomb was born not from the mind of a brilliant human, but from the disturbed mind of a terrifyingly evil Seer. It was filled with tricks—extra wires and switches—that made it near impossible to decipher, as well as shields like Esther's and the invisible wall around the school. One wrong move and the whole thing would blow right here, right now.

Oliver would need days to decipher it. But it would only be hours before the plane reached Germany. He felt overwhelmed and suddenly desperately alone. If only he had the support of his friends, the wisdom of Armando, and the experience of

Professor Amethyst and the other teachers at the School for Seers.

But no sooner had he thought it, than Oliver realized that he did. All those people had given something to him over the time he'd known them; their encouragement, their knowledge, their experience. This was a quest designed for him. In him, all that information converged. Other than Lucas, he was the only Seer who'd been trained by Armando Illstrom. The person most able to dismantle this bomb was Oliver himself. That was why the universe had called to him in the first place.

Buoyed by the revelation, Oliver got to work, focusing on the task at hand. He may not have days at his disposal, but there was still a chance he'd be able to do enough with the hours ahead of him to stop the bomb from working. He became engrossed, just as he had done when making the periscope, when creating the invisibility coat. He drew on every scrap of knowledge he had about inventions, losing himself in theory and physics, focusing his entire mind on dismantling the weapon.

He lost track of everything around him, his mind homing in on this one thing.

*

Suddenly, Oliver felt the engines change beneath him. They were losing speed. He knew what that meant. The plane was preparing to begin its descent.

He blinked with surprise and checked his timetable. Indeed, several hours had passed. In fact, his timetable was flashing red now fully, warning him he was out of bounds and off course. That meant Esther's opening would now be closed and his chance of ever returning to the school completely vanquished. He'd been so engrossed with the bomb that he'd lost track not just of time but of his own personal sacrifice; the school. He'd become so focused that every other distraction had quit his mind. And yet the bomb was still very much intact, still ready to enact its destruction on the world. Panic took hold of him.

Oliver felt the plane's angle change. He grasped out for any kind of handhold, but failed to find anything. He slid, this time toward the front of the truck, to the part behind the driver's cabby. He hit the wall hard and curled up, gritting his teeth, his stomach in knots. The pressure changed rapidly, making his ears pop painfully. The descent was terrifyingly fast, the pilot pushing the plane into a descent just as rapid as its ascension had been.

Then there was a horrible jolting sensation as the plane touched its wheels to the ground.

They'd landed. They'd touched down in Germany.

Oliver was tossed from side to side as the plane careened down the runway. As he bounced around in the back of the truck, teeth rattling, Oliver heard the plane's engines begin to slow. Beneath him, he felt the deceleration. Soon they'd halt entirely.

Things were getting desperate now. He had to do something. Had to think of something. But everything was happening so fast

he couldn't even begin to formulate a plan.

The plane became slower and slower until suddenly it stopped. Oliver heard the engines whine as they were switched off and began to slow. Then scraping noises told him the cargo doors were being opened. He heard footsteps approaching, the scrape of a key in a lock and then the slam of the truck door being closed. The driver of the truck was back.

The engine suddenly rumbled beneath him and revved. Then with some jerking and juddering, daylight started to stream in through the window. They were outside.

Oliver leapt up and looked out the back. The sight that confronted him sent icicles down his spine.

1940s Germany was filled with swastikas.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Oliver gasped at the sight through the window. On every gray building hung a flag with a swastika. On every road sign, on every car window. It was like a jubilee, but instead of colorful bunting there were flags with the hateful symbol upon them. Oliver swallowed, anguished by the sight of them, by the sea of red and black.

The streets were more or less empty, with just a few passing cars and other military trucks. Oliver watched as they drove through a checkpoint manned by the German army and past a truck at the side of the road with soldiers standing beside it, guns at the ready. He felt sick at the sight of it all.

He tore his gaze from the window, turning back to the bomb. He would have to make a decision, take a risk. If he chose the wrong wire the bomb would explode and the world would end. But if he did nothing, Hitler would detonate the bomb and the world would end anyway.

Oliver tried to approach the bomb, but the truck was jostling him too much. He was flung sideways as the truck made a sharp left turn, falling to his knees painfully. No sooner had he drawn himself to his feet than another sharp turn flung him to the floor again. Beneath him, speed bumps made him bounce up and crash back down. His teeth crunched together, over and over, as the truck careened over them.

Then suddenly they stopped. Oliver hauled himself to standing and hurried to the window. They'd reached an imposing-looking gray building, surrounded by barbed wire. Oliver realized with dread that this could be none other than Hitler's headquarters.

The truck began to move again, passing them through the checkpoint. Guard towers cast dark shadows over everything. Oliver gazed up at them, trembling at the sight of the heavily armed soldiers patrolling back and forth upon them.

Then the truck shuddered to a final stop, the sound of its engine cutting out. It was too late. They'd arrived. Time was up and Oliver hadn't had a chance to pull a wire. He hurried to hide behind the crate, some instinct of self-preservation forcing him to flee rather than be caught.

He heard the sound of scraping metal as the back doors of the truck were opened from the outside. He peeped out from his hiding place and saw, with terror, a very familiar face. A face known and feared by every human on the planet. Hitler.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Oliver's breath stopped in his lungs. He couldn't quite believe he was looking at Hitler himself, at the most evil human who'd ever lived. He watched on, frozen with shock, as the terrifying Nazi leader looked into the truck.

Hitler did not seem to notice the strewn pieces of wooden planks. His dark gaze was too fixated on the bomb to realize.

He examined it, his beady eyes scanning what was before him. Oliver could see the sheer delight flashing behind his eyes at the sight of the advanced future technology, of Lucas's creation.

Hitler seemed thrilled by what was in front of him. He spoke in excited, rapid German to someone out of Oliver's eyeline. Then he marched off.

Suddenly, Oliver had an opportunity. Hitler would soon be back to collect his weapon. But in the seconds suddenly available to him, Oliver had to do something. It was now or never. He had to take the risk. Make the choice.

But then, as if planted into his mind by the universe itself, Oliver suddenly realized what he had to do to dismantle the bomb. He'd been going about it all wrong, like a bomb disposal expert rather than a Seer. He didn't need to cut a wire to stop the bomb; he needed to worm inside of it with his mind and use his atomic specialism to rearrange the very atoms within it. Like the objects in Armando's office, he had to turn the atoms from one

state to another. And then he had to hold them there.

Oliver unfocused his eyes and relaxed his brain, inviting in the now familiar sensations needed to summon his powers. This time, they came to him rapidly, easily, far more quickly than ever before, as if fueled by his fear. They flooded his mind with their blinding strength, making his heart pound from the force.

He visualized the bomb in minuscule detail, complete precision, not just every single wire or bolt or metal plating, but every single atom. He could see it all, in crystal-clear, perfect precision, from the sonar shield Lucas had surrounding it to the very chemicals deep inside it that would cause the blast.

Oliver immediately visualized what he needed—the dangerous, volatile chemicals inside turning into water—then he pushed out with his mind. Immediately he felt resistance as his own Seer power counteracted with Lucas's shield. But he could sense it was working, almost as if he could somehow feel the atoms inside reconfiguring themselves in line with his commands.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps. His time was up. They'd come back for the bomb. He had to hold on to his visualization. Which meant he couldn't get caught. He had to hide himself. He ducked behind a stack of smaller wooden boxes.

Hitler was back, several soldiers beside him.

He watched as the bomb was unloaded from the back of the truck. From his hiding place, Oliver watched on as the bomb was set up, mounted onto the rocket launcher that would propel it into

the atmosphere. There were many Nazi soldiers standing around, each looking as menacing as the next. The tension was almost too much to bear. It was compounded by the strain of holding onto the changed atoms within the bomb.

He watched them mount the weapon onto a vertical gurney, its pointed tip directed into the sky. It was ready for launch.

A figure approached. His stance formidable, his aura bone-chilling. The desire to press the button was written all over his face. Now was his moment of glory.

With an evil grin, Hitler reached for the big red button.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Oliver didn't want to watch but he couldn't look away. He had to focus on his visualization. He couldn't waver. Losing concentration for even a millisecond would have catastrophic consequences.

He held his breath. He tensed every muscle. He focused with every semblance of strength he had available to him. He had to keep the bomb from detonating.

Hitler held his palm over the large red button, hovering there. For a brief second, Oliver wondered whether he'd changed his mind, whether the enormity of his actions had suddenly struck him. But then he realized that Hitler was actually drawing out the moment, toying with it. It was as if he wanted to bathe in the pure power this moment gave him. He was playing God and he was reveling in the ultimate power this weapon gave him.

Oliver could see, clearly and plainly, what Professor Amethyst had been telling him about evil, about the desire for power that consumed people. Oliver resolved in that moment that if he walked away from this alive he would never, ever allow himself to become corrupted by his Seer powers. He would not become Lucas. Despite the cobalt within him, he would fight the lure of the dark side for the rest of his days.

And he would not fail now. He held his breath and fixed the image in his mind.

Hitler flexed his fingers over the button. Around him, his soldiers' eyes were wide with adrenaline, with anticipation. Then, in one sudden, violent motion, Hitler slammed his palm down onto the button.

The whole world seemed to pause. Time stood still. Oliver felt a horrible tug in his mind, a headache like lightning bolts striking his brain. The atoms of the bomb were fighting against his reality, pummeling against his mind like the fists of a bully. The command of his mind was in direct opposition to the command of the button Hitler had pushed, to the laws of physics that the design of the bomb relied on. The strain was like nothing Oliver had ever felt.

But he took the blows, over and over as Hitler slammed his palm against the button again and again, his face growing redder with each futile attempt to detonate it.

Oliver could feel his powers draining from each blow. It was sapping his strength. He didn't know if he could hold on any longer. But Hitler was still trying to detonate the bomb, his palm now turned into a fist that he pummeled against the button.

Oliver felt the last semblance of power ebb from him. He couldn't hold on any longer. But just at that moment, Hitler stepped back.

He'd given up!

He turned to the sky and roared his anger.

Oliver released the chains in his mind. With a surge of relief, he let his tension go, exhaling the breath he'd been holding,

relaxing the muscles he'd been straining. For the first time, he became aware of the pain in his jaw from his clenched teeth, and the sweat pouring down his face and back. His whole body felt weak, like he'd accidentally transformed himself into jelly.

There was nothing left in him. No powers. They'd been drained entirely. Oliver staggered, barely able to remain upright. He clutched the trash cans before him to steady himself. He'd prevented the bomb from blowing, for now, but with his powers so severely weakened there'd be no chance of him holding its atoms again. If Hitler turned back and pressed the button one more time, there'd be nothing Oliver could do to stop it.

He watched on, tense, willing Hitler to walk away. Suddenly, the man turned back. Oliver's heart leapt. Hitler eyed the red button. Oliver prayed he would not press it one last time. He felt every muscle in his body clench as Hitler took a slow step closer to the bomb. Then another.

Finally, Hitler stopped. He stood right beside the bomb, by the big red detonator button. Then he turned to his soldiers, barked an order in German, and strode away.

He'd given up.

Reality began to sink in. Oliver had really done it. He'd stopped Lucas's evil plan from coming to fruition. He felt his heart soar.

But the danger was not over yet. Oliver may have saved the world, but now he had to save himself. He was a sitting duck here. It would only be a matter of moments before he was found.

He had to get away.

Hitler's soldiers were talking in hurried German to one another. They seemed very panicked and very confused as they watched their furious leader growing more incensed. He looked like a man on the brink of insanity, spittle flying from his lips as he screamed commands at them.

There was one word Oliver could understand.

“Sabotage!”

The soldiers ran in all directions, searching their locale, seeking out hiding spots. Then someone pointed at the truck in which Oliver was hiding.

Panicking, Oliver cowered back, a lump forming in his throat. He had to do something.

He quickly retreated into his mind, attempting to summon his powers. But all he felt was a fizz. He couldn't access them at all. They'd run dry.

Without his powers, there was only other option. He had to run.

He leapt up from his hiding space and barreled forward. But it was useless. His legs could barely hold him upright. He fell, sprawling against the hard asphalt.

The soldiers spotted him immediately. Within seconds he was surrounded. Terrifying faces looked down at him, glaring their hatred. Amongst them was the face Oliver feared the most. Hitler.

He looked down on Oliver with an expression of contempt

like none he had ever felt before. Not from Edmund. Or Chris. Not even from Lucas. They were nothing compared to the look of pure hatred in Hitler's eyes. It was as if Hitler knew he was to blame.

Then Hitler muttered a word that confirmed Oliver's suspicions.

“Seer.”

Hitler knew. And, Oliver realized with a shudder, he'd had worked out that he was the one who'd foiled him.

Hitler barked something in German at Oliver. Oliver didn't understand his words but the coldness in his tone was unmistakable. Hitler had just ordered his death.

This was it for him, Oliver knew. He would be killed. His life was over. His only solace was that he'd saved the world. His sacrifice was worth that. Now he would die a noble death. He braced himself for the inevitable, for the blow that would extinguish his life.

It did not come.

Suddenly, from above, the roaring sound of an airplane's engine ripped across the sky. Hitler tore his eyes from Oliver and looked up, just as the soldiers around him were doing. His expression was wild, deranged.

Oliver scanned the darkened sky, searching for the source of the enormous noise. He was expecting to see German planes approaching but instead he saw something else entirely.

Cutting through the gray sky was a very small plane unlike

anything Oliver had ever seen before. It moved faster than any plane he knew of, gliding effortlessly through the sky. It was a strange metallic white color, and the translucent window at the front looked like it was made from a film of plastic, like it was some kind of high-tech shield. The technology of the plane could only come from the future, Oliver suddenly realized.

Oliver's first dreadful thought was of Lucas. Had the old man designed some kind of aircraft and come back to this point to rewrite the history Oliver had already changed? To put everything back to how he wanted it to be?

But no, Oliver realized. The plane did not belong to a foe, but a friend. Because there, on the tail, was a design that Oliver was very familiar with: a hoop with three evenly spaced eyes. The symbol of the School for Seers. Seeing it here, in 1940s Germany, amongst the swastikas, seemed incredibly incongruous. It was almost as if he'd conjured it with his mind.

Then Oliver saw something that shocked him to the core. As he looked through the strange cockpit window he discovered that the plane was being flown by none other than Professor Amethyst!

Hitler screamed something in German. Instantly, Oliver heard the sound of soldiers' boots. He turned his gaze from the sky to the commotion ahead of him, watching on with terror as the soldiers ran for their weapons. They got into a huddled formation, pointing their guns at the sky, and began to fire at the plane.

"NO!" Oliver screamed.

The noise was like nothing else. A thousand cracks, each one like a splinter through his eardrums. The gunfire was so loud he could feel it in his bones. There was nothing Oliver could do but cower and pray he wasn't hit in the crossfire. Pray that Professor Amethyst's plane withstood the bullets. Pray that he would make it out of this alive.

“OLIVER!” he suddenly heard a voice cry.

He looked sharply over his shoulder. His brain could not accept what he was seeing. It was too incongruous. It must be a mirage. But no, she was real. There, standing in the shadows, was Esther.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Everything happened at once. Oliver watched as Walter, Hazel, Simon, and Ralph emerged out of the shadows. They stood in an arrow formation behind Esther.

Oliver had no time to consider how they here or how had they had found him. The only thing his brain could comprehend was that he was still alive when a second earlier his death had seemed like a certainty.

Still sprawled on the floor, his body useless and his powers absent, Oliver felt a surge of gratitude and relief as his friends advanced on the soldiers. He had saved the world, now they would save him.

While the soldiers were all distracted by Professor Amethyst's plane, Ralph summoned his powers, directing them upward, and pulled thick, dark clouds across the sky. They rolled in like black waves, suffocating the light. A blinding darkness descended. The sound of gunfire immediately ceased. Without a clear visual on their target, the soldiers had nothing to aim for.

Simon, meanwhile, pulled raindrops from Ralph's clouds. They thundered down in a torrent, instantly soaking Oliver and the rest of the soldiers to the bone.

The group of soldiers around him began to disperse. Oliver caught sight of Hitler running away, abandoning his army just like the coward the history books would reveal him to be. He

must have figured out what was happening, that his plans were being thwarted by Seers, the power of which no mortal was a match. But his soldiers didn't know. He'd abandoned them, leaving them to mop up the mess he'd made.

Finally, Oliver had a chance to escape. Still shocked that he was alive, he pulled himself to his knees. He tried to push to standing but his legs felt almost useless beneath him. He was completely drained of any strength.

Suddenly, someone was beside him. In the gloom of Ralph's cloud, he could just make out the twinkle of emerald green eyes.

"Esther," he stammered.

She looped her arm around him, heaving him to standing. Supporting the whole weight of him, Esther dragged Oliver across the courtyard, pulling him back to the shelter of a porchway. He collapsed against the step.

Esther went to turn back into the fray. But Oliver grasped out for her, getting hold of her hand and clasping it tightly.

"How are you here?" he asked.

"No time to explain," Esther told him. "Just stay safe and wait for instructions."

"Hitler..." Oliver stammered. "He got away."

"There's no time," Esther told him.

Her hand slid from his and she swirled off into the darkness.

Quickly, Esther projected a shield around them all, just as she'd done to keep them safe from the bats. Sheltering in the doorway, Oliver watched on as Hazel took her turn to push

her powers into the sky. Her specialism was chemical, and Oliver realized she was altering the composition of the water in the clouds, turning them a hazy, burned orange color. Fresh raindrops fell from the sky. As they hit the soldiers, the men began to yell in pain. Whatever Hazel had contaminated the clouds with, it stung their skin. Esther's shield kept them safe from harm.

Between Ralph, Hazel, Simon, and Esther, they'd completely handicapped their enemies.

But the bomb still needed to be destroyed. They needed to buy some time, with one last distraction to keep the enemies at bay long enough for Oliver to do his part.

Walter hurried forward and summoned his magnetic powers. Suddenly, all the vehicles in the lot became attracted to one another. The sound of creaking metal surrounded them as their wheels tried to turn, to succumb to the forces Walter's power was imposing upon them.

Suddenly, the magnetism won out. Their brakes could hold them no longer. They zoomed toward each other, gaining speed, until they reached the center and crashed head on into one another. There was an explosion of heat and light. It was so strong the ground shook. Fireballs flew up into the air. The whole thing was ablaze. Walter had created an impenetrable barrier of fire between them and their enemies.

With the flames illuminating the scene, Oliver looked over as his friends hurried toward him. He'd never been more pleased to

see anyone in his life.

He had next to no strength in him, but croaked out, "Whoever said magnetism was the worst specialism?"

Walter grinned, then turned back to look at the scene of devastation. Oliver did the same. He could hardly believe what he was seeing. The power of Seers against mortals was undeniable.

"We have to destroy the bomb," Ralph said.

Oliver shook his head. "It has to be defused first. Any wrong move and it will blow."

"Can you do it?" Simon asked. "Defuse it?"

"I tried," Oliver told him. "But my powers have failed. I've drained them completely."

Esther bent down and gazed into his eyes. "Not with your powers. With your knowledge."

"She's right," Hazel said. "If Lucas made the bomb using what he'd learned from Armando, then you're the only other person in the world who'll be able to dismantle it."

Though he'd already spent hours in the plane trying and failing to work out how to do so, Oliver knew his friends were right.

He nodded with determination. Walter and Simon heaved him to his feet. Oliver gritted his teeth against the pain. Together, they helped him across the courtyard to where the bomb still stood, the rest of his friends following. Fire from the burning trucks stung their skin. The smoke was black and acrid.

Oliver grabbed the bomb's design from his overall pockets.

"Esther, first, can you get through the shield?" he asked.

“There’s one built around it that’s making it hard to access the wires.”

She nodded and unfocused her eyes. The shimmering shield around the bomb disappeared.

Oliver studied the diagrams. His whole body trembled with fatigue. But without the shimmering shield, he could see more clearly what he had to do. Through Lucas’s complex network of wires and trick wires, booby traps and dead ends, he saw how the puzzle fit together.

“The red wire,” he stammered. “It’s the red wire.”

“Are you sure?” Ralph asked. His teeth were practically clenched.

“I’m sure,” Oliver said.

He went to lean forward, but felt Hazel’s hand on his wrist. “You’re shaking,” she said. “Let me. I have a smaller, steadier hand.”

Everyone held their breath as Hazel reached forward. Her nimble fingers gently bypassed the complex bundle of multicolored wire, delicately taking hold of the red one Oliver had indicated.

“Okay,” she said, as her fingers squeezed on the wire. “Now or never.”

Simon closed his eyes. Ralph looked away. The tension radiating from Walter was palpable. Esther was starting to shake from the effort of holding the shield back. Oliver squeezed his hands into fists. If he’d calculated wrong they would all die.

Hazel tugged. The wire snapped. The bomb did not blow.
“You did it!” Walter cried.

The boys turned to Oliver, slapping him on the back, cheering. Esther flopped forward, drained from holding back the shield. Hazel seemed paralyzed in her crouched position, holding up the snapped red wire.

“We have to destroy it,” Oliver said. “All of it. Quick.”

They got to work, ripping apart the plates of metal, pulling out the wires, throwing everything onto the bonfire.

Ralph pointed to the sky. “There’s Professor Amethyst’s plane coming back to collect us. Let’s go!”

They all looked up as the headmaster’s strange plane swooped down. It behaved like something between a helicopter and an eagle. It touched down, not with wheels, but with feet shaped like talons.

His friends started hurrying toward it.

But Oliver knew there was one more thing he had to do. In order to fully destroy the bomb and make sure it could never be made again, he had to destroy the plans.

He pulled the dossier from his overall pocket and threw it into the inferno. He watched the plans burn. As it was incinerated, he felt a swell of relief.

Satisfied that it would never be made again, Oliver turned and hurried across the courtyard, in the direction of the headmaster’s plane. Hazel and Simon were already inside and Esther stood by the door, gesturing for them to hurry up and get inside.

Walter leapt into the plane. Ralph shoved Oliver and he flew into the open hatch too. A second after, Ralph leapt in behind him.

The plane's engines whirred and within a matter of seconds, they took to the sky. Hazel grappled with the door. She heaved it shut, but not before Oliver looked out at the scene of chaos left in their wake.

The place was destroyed, drenched in water and rust-colored puddles. The raging fire at the center concealed twisted metal from all the trucks that had exploded and the pieces of bomb. Soldiers lay dotted around, incapacitated. It was a satisfying sight.

Oliver looked over at his friends, drinking in the sight of each of their faces; Hazel's sincere gray eyes, Ralph's friendly dimples, Walter's cheeky grin, Simon's pale, wide-set eyes, and finally Esther's coy blush. His heart soared.

"We did it," he stammered to them all.

Despite their fatigue, they all cheered.

Suddenly, Oliver realized it was time to tell his friends the truth about his test results. He'd avoided it because he had not wanted his friends to treat him differently because of it. But after what they'd all just gone through together, he knew it was time to tell the truth.

"I need to tell you something," Oliver said. "About who I am. What I am. My test. I'm atomic. But my type is mixed. I'm bromine *and* cobalt."

They all looked at each other, stunned.

“No way,” Esther murmured, sounding both surprised and impressed. “I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“What a turn up for the books,” Simon exclaimed.

“I’m sorry I hid it from you all. I just wanted to fit in. I was scared you wouldn’t accept me.”

Oliver felt a gentle hand press into the top of his arm. He looked over and saw Esther looking kindly at him.

“Of course we accept you,” she said.

Then everyone leaned in, patting and hugging Oliver. He smiled, grateful to be accepted for who he was.

Suddenly, Oliver became aware of the feeling of a leaden weight in his whole body. He felt empty, like a shell of a person. He’d used up so much of his powers, a tiredness like none he’d ever felt before overcame him.

As the plane soared through the sky, Oliver felt overcome with exhaustion. His friends were talking happily and enthusiastically, going over the events in Germany, but Oliver was too tired to even focus on their voices. He was too tired to even hear their congratulatory words and their affirmations that he’d saved the world.

His eyelids felt so heavy. He tried to fight it, but they started to flutter closed. He couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. All he could do was flop down in the back of the cabin, spent, overcome with exhaustion, and let blackness envelop him. He fell into a deep, deep sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Two familiar faces looked down at Oliver.

“I think he’s conscious,” the man said.

“You’re right,” the woman replied, kindly. “Oliver, can you hear us?”

Oliver sat bolt upright, looking from one face to the other. They were the man and woman of his visions. He wasn’t in the airplane anymore, but in some dark, empty space like the abyss of Professor Amethyst’s dimension. All that existed in the vast blackness were the three of them.

“Where am I?” Oliver asked. “Where are my friends? Where’s the headmaster’s airplane?” His voice sounded strange, blunted, as though the sound waves were traveling differently than normal.

“You’re somewhere between asleep and awake,” the man said. “You’re still in the plane. Your friends are still with you.”

Oliver felt relieved.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“We came to congratulate you,” the woman said. “For saving mankind.”

Oliver recalled the vision he’d had where the man and woman had told him he had a task to save mankind. For some reason, these two strangers cared deeply about his success. But he had no idea why. They’d never given him satisfactory answers, had never explained themselves.

“Who are you?” he asked. “My guardian angels or something? Why are you always watching me? Why do you keep appearing in my dreams?”

The man and woman exchanged a glance.

“I think you know who we are,” the woman said softly.

“I do?” Oliver asked.

The man nodded. His smile was so kind. “Yes. You do. You just need to accept it.”

Oliver’s throat felt thick. His hand went to his blond hair. Its color matched the woman’s perfectly. And his eyes were the same brown as the man’s, completely unlike his family’s matching blue eyes. Nothing had ever felt right in his life. His family had never felt like his own. Could it really be that the Blues weren’t his parents? That Chris was not his brother? Would he sound crazy to suggest that these people were his parents?

His voice wavered as he spoke, hitching with hope. “Are you my parents?”

Immediately, the couple burst into grins. They took hold of one another’s hands.

“That’s right,” the woman confirmed. “We’re your mom and dad.”

Mom. Dad. He repeated the words in his head as if they were some new, alien concepts.

“But I don’t understand,” he said. “I have a mom and dad. How can you be my parents?”

The man’s expression faltered, then dropped. He looked sadly

at the woman, then back to Oliver.

“We lost you,” he said, his voice strained. “It’s very complicated.”

Oliver’s mind began reeling. It was too much to comprehend. But a sense of understanding overcame him, like all the pieces were fitting into place. Of course he wasn’t a Blue. He didn’t even look like them. They shared no similarities or interests. He’d always been the black sheep of the family and this would explain why.

These people, the man and woman of his visions, were his real parents. His mom and dad. Saying it in his head didn’t feel strange, he realized. It felt right.

Just then, the image of his real parents started to fade.

“Where are you going?” Oliver asked.

“You’re waking up,” his mom said, gently.

“But where are you?” Oliver asked, exasperated. “Why do I only see you when I’m dreaming? Where can I find you in the real world?”

“There’s no time to explain,” his dad replied. “But you will see us again. Soon.”

“And one day we’ll be reunited,” his mom added. “Properly. We’ll be together.”

The two figures were little more than shadows now.

“Don’t leave me!” Oliver cried.

“We never leave you,” his dad said. Oliver couldn’t even make out his features anymore. “Remember that. We’re always with

you.”

Then, just like the sound of the whispering wind, Oliver heard his parents’ parting words.

“We love you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Oliver felt a gentle shaking on his shoulders. His eyelids fluttered open. He was looking straight into Esther's emerald eyes.

Oliver lingered for a moment, gazing at her pleasant features. Then the grogginess in his head started to fade and he remembered where he was; Professor Amethyst's airplane. He sat bolt upright.

Unlike with the sleep pod, Oliver could tell that hours had passed. His body was stiff. His neck cricked painfully as he looked about him at the interior of Professor Amethyst's strange airplane.

The engines were little more than a gentle background hum. There was no telltale signs of jostling.

"We've landed," Esther told him, smiling sweetly.

"Landed?" he asked. His voice came out as a croak. "Where?"

"Home."

"Home? You mean..."

Esther nodded kindly. "The School for Seers."

Oliver fell back, stunned. He'd thought he would never be allowed back in this place, that he'd never set foot inside the school again. He was so relieved. Dazed with happiness.

Esther's musical voice was still sounding. He focused all his attention on her.

“You slept the whole way,” she told him. “Professor Amethyst said you’d burned yourself out using so much of your powers to break the bomb. He can’t believe you were even able to, after the small amount of training you’ve had. But I can. I always knew you were special, Oliver.”

Oliver blushed deeply. “What happened? With the gap in the wall? With the timetables?”

“I held it for as long as I could,” Esther explained. “But when the timetables came on I knew that I had to do something. Edmund of course immediately went to Professor Amethyst about what we’d done to him. I think he was expecting him to condemn you forever or something, but instead he immediately rallied the school.”

“Edmund accidentally saved the day?” Oliver mused. “How ironic.”

Esther chuckled. “I suppose so. Professor Amethyst already knew you were in Germany, at Hitler’s IQ. At least he said that that’s where you ended up in most timelines. So we flew there, parachuted in, and, well, you remember the rest.”

“How did you convince him to let you come?” Oliver asked.

“Actually, we didn’t,” Esther confessed. “He chose us to come. He knew our powers would work the best of everyone’s because of our bond with you, because of the emotion.”

At the mention of his friends, Oliver’s gaze immediately roved around the empty cabin. “Where are they? Ralph, Hazel, Simon, Walter?” He noticed the cabin door was open, letting in bright

light.

“They went on ahead to spread the good news,” Esther explained. “Are you ready for your hero’s welcome?”

“My... what?” Oliver asked timidly.

Esther’s smile widened, showing off all her pearly white teeth. “You’re a *hero*, Oliver! Come on.”

It was all happening too quickly for Oliver to get his head around. But as Esther reached forward and grabbed his hand all his thoughts faded to nothing. All he could focus on now was the feeling of their interlinked fingers, of her warm, soft skin.

She tugged him toward the open doors of the aircraft. Oliver staggered, disoriented by the noise of applause that seemed to get louder the closer he got to the door.

He stepped out to a cacophony of cheers. Bright synthesized sunlight made him blink.

As his focus adjusted, he was able to see he was inside one of the School for Seers’ atriums—a large one filled with every vehicle you could imagine from ferries to helicopters, to futuristic ones like the headmaster’s plane. The plane must have hovered in through an opening at the top of the atrium.

Crowded onto every single walkway around its perimeter were students and teachers, watching him eagerly, clapping, cheering for him, jumping up and down, whooping and hollering at his success.

Oliver felt a swell of emotion in his chest. It was more than just pride. More than just gratitude. It was the feeling of home.

There was a platform ahead, upon which stood Professor Amethyst with Ralph, Hazel, Walter, and Simon in a line behind him. They were beckoning for Oliver to approach. Esther tugged on his hand gently, guiding him toward them.

As Oliver drew up beside his friends, the whole atrium fell silent. Professor Amethyst began to speak, projecting his booming voice all around the auditorium.

“Oliver and his friends completed a remarkable feat today. They saved the world from destruction. Never in the history of our school has a Seer achieved such a feat.”

Everyone cheered again, whooping and hollering. It was only then that Oliver noticed a single blank face in the audience. Edmund. His arms were folded, his eyes narrowed and fixed on Oliver. Oliver shuddered.

“The danger posed to our school by the rogue Seers who attacked has passed,” Professor Amethyst continued. “We cannot be attacked again. Though there will be more challenges ahead for us, for now, we must bask in our triumph. A celebratory feast will be held in the F hall!”

The crowds began to disperse, eager for the meal. Oliver’s friends crowded around him.

“Awfully good to see you back to health, chum,” Simon said, slapping his shoulder affectionately.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Hazel added.

“That was awesome,” Walter grinned. “Talk about brave.”

“Or stupid,” Ralph added in his teacherly tone. “I almost had

a heart attack when I woke up and heard you'd gone."

"It was a mad thing to do," Hazel agreed. "You're lucky Professor Amethyst decided to help."

"He didn't have much of a choice," Esther argued. "The whole school was in danger. He had to accept the truth."

"That he was even able to get back into the school is a miracle," Ralph agreed.

Their voices carried on, but Oliver got lost in their words. He felt unable to follow any of the threads of their conversation. He felt very disoriented. Something didn't feel quite right.

He turned from his friends and tugged on the headmaster's sleeve.

"May we speak privately?" he asked.

Professor Amethyst nodded. He glanced over Oliver's head and Oliver turned to see all his friends staring at them, confusion on their brows.

"Aren't you coming to the feast?" Hazel asked.

"I just have to..." Oliver stammered. "There's some stuff I need to discuss."

"Oliver, you work too hard!" Walter exclaimed. "Why don't you eat first?"

"Rest up," Ralph added.

"Relax a little," Simon agreed.

But Oliver shook his head. "I'm sorry. I have to speak to Professor Amethyst."

His gaze lingered on Esther. He could see sorrow in her eyes.

It was like she knew something that Oliver did not fully know yet himself, about what he was going to say to the headmaster and what the outcome of their conversation would be.

Professor Amethyst led Oliver by the shoulders through the doors. They exited out into the main atrium, right at the top level of the school, and crossed the short distance to the sixth dimension. Then they entered into the room and started to float upward. Glowing jellyfish in a myriad of bright colors floated all around them. It was beautiful. Relaxing.

Or at least, it would be, if Oliver's sense of anguish had not been growing greater and greater with every passing second.

"What is troubling you?" Professor Amethyst asked.

"Lucas," Oliver confessed. "I... I think it's my fault that he hated the school so much."

"How so?"

"Lucas was a Seer all along," Oliver explained. "A cobalt one. But Armando didn't think he was, and so he wasn't guided, or sent here to school. The cobalt in him turned him rogue. What if by going back in time and revealing my powers to Armando, I was the one who made him think that Lucas wasn't the Seer he should guide? It's all my fault. I made the whole thing happen."

The headmaster shook his head. "Perhaps you ought to know that Lucas was turned away from the school."

"What?" Oliver gasped.

Professor Amethyst nodded. "It was my mistake, Oliver. I was the one who failed to see the Seer in Lucas. But even so, we are

not responsible for the choices others make. Lucas turned to the dark side of his own accord.”

“Did he?” Oliver contested. “He was the same age as me. The factory was his home. Armando was his guide. Then I ruined everything for him.”

He felt the headmaster’s hand come down on his shoulder. It squeezed.

“Lucas did, indeed, have a hard life as a boy. No one can dispute that. But so too did you, Oliver. And yet you’ve not allowed yourself to get bitter. Lucas chose the path he followed. Your presence in the past was not to blame.”

Oliver wished he could believe the headmaster. But it would take a long time before he accepted he was not to blame. That his meddling in the past had not set off a chain reaction. It was a heavy burden to bear.

“He gets his revenge eventually,” Oliver said aloud. “Perhaps not as dramatically as he wanted to, with Hitler and destroying the world, but he goes on to kill Armando anyway.”

“A Seer cannot fix everything,” Professor Amethyst told him. “It is a hard lesson to learn and you are not the first to grapple with that dilemma. I have had this conversation over and over myself. But there are some things woven into the fabric of space and time that a Seer cannot control. Hitler, for example. You thwarted the plot of a rogue Seer who was interfering with time, aiding him to destroy. But Hitler is still the man you read about in history class. The things he has done cannot be changed. Unless

you are acting against the sabotage of the rogue Seers, you must let it go. We cannot make everything perfect.”

“Hitler was going to kill me,” Oliver said. “But is death even possible if it changes your destiny?”

The headmaster replied with a cautious tone in his voice. “Even if your destiny demands you live, you can still die. Nothing is set in stone. But the universe will always try to find a way. If you die when there is more to your destiny, the universe will step in, pull on more threads, call to more Seers. Some things cannot be woven into the fabric of time. Especially the acts of rogue Seers.”

“Wait,” Oliver said, as a sudden a thought struck him. “Lucas was a rogue Seer. Does that mean his actions can be undone?”

If Armando was killed by Lucas, a rogue Seer, did that mean there was a chance he could alter the timeline once more? That there was a better route the universe wanted it to follow?

The headmaster paused. A small smile twitched at the corner of his lips. Oliver got the distinct impression he was leading him toward a conclusion. Excitement raced through him.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he stammered. “None of Lucas’s actions are woven into the fabric of time because he’s a rogue Seer. Including killing Armando.”

Professor Amethyst’s smile grew larger.

“Armando was never supposed to die,” Oliver said with sudden realization. “Just like Hitler’s bomb was never supposed to detonate.” He gazed at the headmaster. “You knew, didn’t

you? You knew all along?”

Professor Amethyst nodded. “Everything has a purpose, a reason. Nothing can be dictated. A Seer must find their own way to their path. And you have. Armando Illstrom is your guide not just because you are a perfect match, but because he, himself, is important to the universe. Your destinies are intertwined. You need each other. And the universe needs you both.”

Oliver felt winded by the revelation. His mind swirled. He’d thought all hope was lost for Armando. But now he had to adjust to the reality that perhaps it was not. That he may be able to save Armando yet.

“Armando is part of my destiny,” Oliver stated aloud.

“And every moment that passes, he is in danger,” Professor Amethyst added. “I told you in our first meeting that I was only able to secure you a few days with him. That is the power of Lucas’s meddling. It will be difficult. Nearly impossible. And with every moment that passes, Lucas’s actions become more entrenched in time.”

A new realization struck Oliver. He felt a crushing sensation in his chest.

“I have to return...” he said breathlessly.

At last, Esther’s look of grief made sense to him. She’d already worked out that Armando could be saved and that Oliver was the one to do it. That he would leave her. Leave the school. And that meant possibly never coming back.

“I’m needed at the factory. I have to go there. Now.”

The headmaster remained silent. But Oliver understood the look in his eyes. This was his destiny. This was where every moment so far had been guiding him.

It had been fate aligning that had allowed him back into the School for Seers. Next time, he may not be so lucky. There was no guarantee that it would again in the future. Leaving now could be the end of his time at the School for Seers.

Professor Amethyst remained stoic. “Do you fully understand what leaving means for you? What the consequences of your actions may be?”

Oliver nodded gravely. “That I might never be able to come back.”

“And is that a sacrifice you are ready to make?” the headmaster pressed. “Are you really going to give up everything you have here for your guide?”

Oliver could feel grief like a weight pressing into his chest.

“I have to,” he stammered. “Armando needs to live. I don’t know why yet, but perhaps it is something to do with inventions. He’s making many great things for mankind.”

“Then I must give you this,” the headmaster said.

He pulled something from his pocket and handed it to Oliver. It was an amulet. The design embossed upon it was a hoop with three eyes. The symbol of the School for Seers.

“Wear this at all times. It will glow when a timeline converges with the moment you are in, one that may allow you back into the school. It will guide you here.”

Oliver clutched it with gratitude. There was a life line after all. Perhaps one day he could come back to this place.

“Now, go to the feast,” Professor Amethyst said. “Your friends deserve to know what you’re planning. After that, I will escort you to the exit. A proper one,” he stressed, arching an eyebrow, “rather than the rip you and Miss Valentini made in my shields.”

Oliver nodded gravely. He left the sixth dimension, heading to the elevator. As he rode down to the ground floor he fought back his tears. How could he say goodbye to his friends? How could he face them knowing he may never see them again? That saying goodbye to them now may be for the last time?

He reached the food court. But before he even entered, the doors opened. Out streamed his friends.

“Oliver!” Ralph cried, surprised. “We were just coming to look for you.”

Oliver turned his eyes down to the ground. Like Esther, they must have sensed something was awry. Surely they hadn’t had time to eat a thing, instead choosing to seek him out.

With a spark of grief inside of him, he looked from one face to the next. The thought of saying goodbye to them was so painful it was almost enough to make Oliver change his mind. But the feeling that he was supposed to go was too strong. It was like a magnet pulling him to the factory.

“I’m leaving,” he said, cutting straight to the chase, ripping off the Band-Aid in one go.

There was no hubbub, no disagreement. It was as if they’d all

silently come to the same conclusion. But the sense of loss was tangible, and it swelled up within the silence.

“We’re not going to be able to change your mind, are we?” Simon said.

Oliver shook his head.

“Even if we tell you you’re being an idiot,” Hazel added. There was no cruelty in her tone, just tears shining in her gray eyes.

Oliver laughed sadly and shook his head.

“Or if I told you you’d be breaking the rules again?” Ralph added.

Oliver shook his head again.

“Will you stick around for one last game of switchit?” Walter asked.

“I can’t,” Oliver said, the sadness inside him growing deeper and deeper.

Esther stepped forward. “You promised me a second date,” she said. Her voice cracked.

“I know,” Oliver replied. “I’m sorry. But who knows what the future holds. I might be back one day.”

Ralph clapped a hand down on Oliver’s shoulder.

“Good luck,” he said, his eyes brimming with fought back tears.

Oliver embraced him. Then suddenly arms were all around him, holding him tightly, surrounding him with love and acceptance and friendship. He could stay in this moment forever, Oliver thought, drinking in the feelings of care and warmth he’d

craved his whole life. But there was a greater purpose. His duty as a Seer demanded it. Armando needed to live. For the sake of the universe and everything within it, he would have to sacrifice his friends.

He pulled out of the hug, too pained to look over at them one last time. Then he turned and hurried away.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Oliver walked alongside Professor Amethyst, his gaze on his shoes, his mood morose. They entered the sixth dimension and Oliver took in the sight of the miraculous room, knowing it would be the last time he would enter it. All around him, orbs glittered in the blackness. It was a beautiful sight.

“I have created a wormhole,” the headmaster explained, as he led Oliver deeper into the darkness. “One that will take you back to your timeline.”

Oliver’s mouth dropped open. “You mean to say this will lead me straight home?”

The headmaster nodded. “It will take you directly to the factory.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said with deep gratitude.

But Professor Amethyst’s expression remained stoic. “Wormholes are not things that can easily be created. I wouldn’t do it for just anyone, but for you Oliver, I think the risk is worth it. You must act fast, though. This is a one-time wormhole and will expire very soon.”

Oliver nodded and took a deep, sad breath. He touched the amulet Professor Amethyst had gifted him and felt that it was burning hot beneath his fingertips. Professor Amethyst pushed the door open.

Oliver blinked in surprise at the surreal sight of the factory

storeroom just on the other side. A sort of shimmering film seemed to be all that separated this point in space to that one.

“How will I get back?” Oliver asked.

Professor Amethyst studied him gravely.

“You won’t,” he said.

The finality in his voice shook Oliver to his core.

“This is a one-time-only wormhole,” Professor Amethyst stressed again. “Once you step through, the door will disappear from existence entirely. It will not lead you back to the school. Do you understand?”

Oliver looked back at the headmaster. “I understand.”

Oliver felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the time he’d spent at the School for Seers. Without Professor Amethyst, none of this would have happened. He’d never have made such amazing friends in Walter, Ralph, Simon, Hazel, and Esther, nor had the opportunity to learn about who he was and hone his skills. He’d even finally found a sport he loved in switchit! Thanks to the school, he would now have memories he could cherish forever, not to mention powers he could continue to develop.

“Thank you for everything,” he stammered.

Professor Amethyst nodded. “You’re welcome, Oliver. And good luck.”

Oliver turned back and looked through the doorway at the store cupboard. The thought of leaving the school was almost too much to bear. He may never come back to this place, never see his friends or teachers again. The future was so uncertain. He had

no idea what was waiting for him on the other side of that door. How he'd changed the future.

But now was the time to be brave. If he'd learned anything, it was to be bold, be confident, to trust himself. And so he squeezed the amulet in his fist tightly and took a big step into the wormhole.

There was a strange whooshing noise. Oliver felt wind whip through his hair. His shirt billowed like the sails of a boat, and his body felt very strange, as though every atom was being tugged apart. It was hard to breathe in the wind tunnel. Harder still to see. All Oliver could do was turn his head to the side and grope blindly forward.

Suddenly, Oliver collided with something hard. He opened his eyes in time to see his flailing hands knock several brooms from against the wall where they'd been leaning. The rushing wind and peculiar sensations stopped completely.

Oliver immediately reached for his amulet. The metal in his fist was now ice cold. He let go and looked behind him. The door was gone, and with it, the School for Seers.

There was no turning back now.

NOW AVAILABLE FOR PRE-ORDER!

THE
ORB
OF
KANDRA

OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK TWO)



THE ORB OF KANDRA

(Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book Two)

“A powerful opener to a series [that] will produce a combination of feisty protagonists and challenging circumstances to thoroughly involve not just young adults, but adult fantasy fans who seek epic stories fueled by powerful friendships and adversaries.”

--Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan) (re A Throne for Sisters)

“Morgan Rice's imagination is limitless!”

--Books and Movie Reviews (re A Throne for Sisters)

From #1 Bestselling fantasy author Morgan Rice comes a new series for middle grade readers—and adults, too! Fans of Harry Potter and Percy Jackson—look no further!

In **THE ORB OF KANDRA: OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK TWO)**, 11 year old Oliver Blue is back in the present day, racing to save Armando before his destined moment to die.

But when Oliver learns that the sacred Orb of Kandra has been stolen, he knows it is up to him—and him alone—to save the school. And the only way is to travel back in time, to the

England of 1690s, and to save one very important person: Sir Isaac Newton.

The Obsidian School, meanwhile, has powerful seers of its own, and all are bent on Oliver's destruction. And when they enlist and transform Oliver's bully brother, Chris, it may just mean a fight to the death.

An uplifting fantasy, **THE ORB OF KANDRA** is book #2 in a riveting new series filled with magic, love, humor, heartbreak, tragedy, destiny, and a series of shocking twists. It will make you fall in love with Oliver Blue, and keep you turning pages late into the night.

Book #3 in the series (**THE OBSIDIANS**) is now also available!

“The beginnings of something remarkable are there.”

--San Francisco Book Review (re A Quest of Heroes)

Also available are Morgan Rice's many series in the fantasy genre, including **A QUEST OF HEROES (BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER'S RING)**, a free download with over 1,300 five star reviews!

THE
ORB
OF
KANDRA

OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK TWO)



MORGAN RICE

THE ORB OF KANDRA

(Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book Two)

**Did you know that I've written multiple series?
If you haven't read all my series, click the
image below to download a series starter!**



Books by Morgan Rice

OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS

THE MAGIC FACTORY (Book #1)

THE ORB OF KANDRA (Book #2)

THE OBSIDIANS (Book #3)

THE INVASION CHRONICLES

TRANSMISSION (Book #1)

ARRIVAL (Book #2)

ASCENT (Book #3)

RETURN (Book #4)

THE WAY OF STEEL

ONLY THE WORTHY (Book #1)

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book #1)

A COURT FOR THIEVES (Book #2)
A SONG FOR ORPHANS (Book #3)
A DIRGE FOR PRINCES (Book #4)
A JEWEL FOR ROYALS (BOOK #5)
A KISS FOR QUEENS (BOOK #6)
A CROWN FOR ASSASSINS (Book #7)
A CLASP FOR HEIRS (Book #8)

OF CROWNS AND GLORY

SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)
ROGUE, PRISONER, PRINCESS (Book #2)
KNIGHT, HEIR, PRINCE (Book #3)
REBEL, PAWN, KING (Book #4)
SOLDIER, BROTHER, SORCERER (Book #5)
HERO, TRAITOR, DAUGHTER (Book #6)
RULER, RIVAL, EXILE (Book #7)
VICTOR, VANQUISHED, SON (Book #8)

KINGS AND SORCERERS

RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Book #1)
RISE OF THE VALIANT (Book #2)
THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)
A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)

A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)

NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

THE SORCERER'S RING

A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1)

A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)

A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)

A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)

A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)

A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)

A SEA OF SHIELDS (Book #10)

A REIGN OF STEEL (Book #11)

A LAND OF FIRE (Book #12)

A RULE OF QUEENS (Book #13)

AN OATH OF BROTHERS (Book #14)

A DREAM OF MORTALS (Book #15)

A JOUST OF KNIGHTS (Book #16)

THE GIFT OF BATTLE (Book #17)

THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

ARENA ONE: SLAVERSUNNERS (Book #1)

ARENA TWO (Book #2)

ARENA THREE (Book #3)

VAMPIRE, FALLEN

BEFORE DAWN (Book #1)

THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS

TURNED (Book #1)

LOVED (Book #2)

BETRAYED (Book #3)

DESTINED (Book #4)

DESIRED (Book #5)

BETROTHED (Book #6)

VOWED (Book #7)

FOUND (Book #8)

RESURRECTED (Book #9)

CRAVED (Book #10)

FATED (Book #11)

OBSESSED (Book #12)

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series **THE SORCERER'S RING**, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS**, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series **KINGS AND SORCERERS**, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series **OF CROWNS AND GLORY**, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series **A THRONE FOR SISTERS**, comprising eight books (and counting); of the new science fiction series **THE INVASION CHRONICLES**, comprising four books; and of the new fantasy series **OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS**, comprising three books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!