

Driver's Education In Dimension Twelve

PROLOGUE

Xive Yaroon ran a hand professionally over the bark of the ancient *Piral* tree, finally selecting a long, narrow section of bark three inches long.

Lord Siron winced as Xive carefully outlined a small rectangle on the trunk with her knife. "Mistress Yaroon, is it truly necessary—"

Xive smiled blandly, the silver of her knife flashing for a moment as she detached the bark strip. "Milord Siron," she said with infinite patience, rolling the bark into a tube, "your beloved *Piral* is dying." She jabbed a hand towards the brown boughs drooping overhead. "Taking such a small piece of bark does your tree no more harm than—than—" she paused, glancing at her employer's hand, "Than that scratch, there, on your palm, hurts you. Would you let a wound fester to avoid the pain of cleaning it? Milord," she interjected suddenly, "This is a new cut! When did this happen? Here—" She took his hand. "Let me bandage—"

"Thank you, Mistress, I'm all right," Lord Siron said uncomfortably, drawing his hand in under his jacket. Xive watched him critically, slipping her flask of water off her belt. He was lying. She had never seen anyone so emaciated. He had dark shadows under his eyes, over sunken cheeks and a thin mouth which gaped constantly like a fish, as if even breathing was a trial.

Xive swished the water around in her mouth, then, with a glance at Lord Siron, discreetly spat it on the ground.

"How long will this take?"

"A few minutes, Milord," Xive said. "you may wait in the shade if you like." Lord Siron immediately sank to the ground as if his knees would not support his legs one more second and leaned heavily against his tree. Xive shot him a worried glance. Work was scarce enough—imagine what would happen if her only employer in three months died on her watch?

Might as well get on with it. Xive carefully placed the tube of bark on her tongue, then slowly closed her mouth, praying to Kiada, protector of Curse-Sensors, that whatever curse was laid on the ancient *Piral*, it was not poison which could affect a human. That was, after all, the reason why Curse-Tasters were so rare, and why there was so little work. It was a rare person who would chance being killed by the curse she was investigating, and a rare employer who didn't fear the wrath of a Curse-Taster's family. *Curse-Smellers and Curse-Seers have it easy*, she grumbled to herself, biting gently down on the bark.

A taste of burnt rubber filled her mouth, overloading her carefully attuned taste buds. Xive just barely controlled the urge to spit the bark out. Steeling herself, she chewed. The foul rubber taste exploded in her mouth again. Xive choked, controlled her stomach, and forced herself to analyze the putrid taste in her mouth. She had been expecting the sickly sweetness of a Stunted Growth curse, or the dry grit of a Waterless curse. This strange, rubbery taste was like nothing she had experienced before. Very faintly, beneath the overpowering rubber, she could detect the acid tang all man-made curses shared, so whatever curse had befallen the *Piral*, it was definitely unnatural. But other than that...

The bark had turned to tasteless mush. Xive spat the bark out on the ground and took another swig of the unicorn water.

“Well?” Lord Siron demanded. He looked pale.

“It’s definitely cursed,” Xive said slowly.

“I am aware of that, Mistress Yaroon,” Lord Siron said dryly.

“All I can tell you, Milord, is that your *Piral* tastes of rubber. I have never tasted anything like it before. I don’t know what it means, or—”

“Rubber.” Lord Siron folded his thin arms across his chest. “*Rubber*. That’s *all* you can tell me?”

“Yes, Milord.”

Lord Siron covered his face with a trembling hand. “I expected as much,” he said sadly. “Riyan the Eye himself has inspected my tree. If the Eye could not break my curse, why should some no-name curse-spitter from who-knows-where—”

“Milord, please!” Xive was beginning to panic, seeing her only job in months slipping out of her fingers—or off her tongue, should she say... “Please, don’t write me off yet. Give me a week—”

“Fine! Take a week!” Lord Siron pulled himself slowly up, his gnarled hands gripping the trunk like knots on the tree itself. He glanced at her once, sadly, with eyes the color of the *Piral*’s leaves—pale, clear blue, with a hint of curse-born brown—then turned away and began slowly working his way back to the house.

Xive watched him go, frowning. There was something deeper than pride in his attachment to the tree, she knew it. She had thought it was simply a valuable belonging, but now she wasn’t sure...

He was a sick man, too. She knew that from the bitter taste hovering in the air when he was near, very faint but reminiscent of eating slightly spoiled food. Oh, well—the health of her employer was not her concern, only the health of his tree. She was a Curse-Taster, after all, not a doctor.

Xive reached out a hand and ran it along the tree’s smooth bark. “Riyan the Eye,” she whispered to herself. “By all the gods...”

Thank God, Derek thought, gripping the edge of his seat, *for passenger-side brakes in Driver’s Ed cars.*

“Chris!” the teacher screeched. “That was a stop sign!”

“Oh! I—I know! I’m sorry, I—”

“Slow *down!*”

“I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be sorry, just slow down!”

Only three more classes, Derek told himself. *Twelve more hours...* He closed his eyes as the care swerved, narrowly avoiding one of the new VW bugs, whose horn screeched furiously at them.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I—”

“Shut up and take a right,” the teacher growled, shoving strands of graying hair out of his face. “Turn signal!” he shot, groping under the seat and pulling out a purple box.

Derek tore his eyes off the road—Chris seemed to be catching on—and watched the instructor, who had introduced himself only as “Loe.” Derek had never seen a man with a braid before. He had never seen blue earlobes, either.

“Left, then a three-point turn by the fence. Cookie, Derek?”

Derek blinked. The cookie sitting in Loe’s outstretched hand was green. “Thanks,” he said without much enthusiasm, but his teacher had turned away.

Chris’s three-point turn had turned out to have about seven points, and the little white Driver’s Ed car was still almost perpendicular to the curb. While Loe was shouting at his student Derek examined the cookie. It looked as if broccoli had been the main ingredient. He took an experimental sniff, and immediately all other thoughts flew away. In an instant the unappetizing green lump had changed into a luscious confection, begging to be eaten. A strange vision of a king’s banquet filled Derek’s brain, of dozens upon dozens of platters piled high with small, green cookies. A prince, complete with glittering crown, fur-lined cloak and satin tunic, reached for a cookie. As the prince’s teeth closed down on the sugary morsel, Derek followed...

A putrid taste, at once both acid-sour and sickly sweet, filled Derek’s mouth. He coughed and spat the cookie out. All visions of banquets vanished, and the cookie broke cleanly in two with what Derek could have sworn was a disappointed sigh.

Derek stared at the cookie. “The...the...” with a sudden burst of energy, he rolled down the window and flung the offending morsel out. It hit the street and exploded in a shower of green sparks.

“I said *left*, moron!”

“I’m really sorry, Mr. Loe, I—”

“Shuddup and drive!”

The seemed to be unaware of the explosion or the small green fire that now burned in the road behind them. Derek had just decided not to say anything about it when Loe tossed one of the cookies in his mouth.

“*Danger!*” a voice screamed in his head. “No!” Derek shouted without thinking. “Don’t eat that!”

Loe gave him a look and bit down. “Left lane,” he muttered, spraying green crumbs. He swallowed and burped.

That’s when the air shook with a great *crack*, green lightning sparkled around the car, and the gray pavement of the road ahead rippled, shook, and changed into a wide dirt track.

“No!” Loe shrieked. “It’s impossible! How...” His face contorted, his green eyes filled with anger and fear, he looked wildly around the compartment. His eyes focused on the box of cookies, and with a snarl of fury he flung it out the car window. The resulting explosion was worthy of display on the Fourth of July. for a moment Derek thought he saw—but this was impossible—a *unicorn* stomp out of the fire, green flames licking his tail, snort in annoyance and gallop off again.

When Derek finally peeled his eyes away from the cookie fire, Loe had vanished.

The car had slowly rolled to a stop. Chris was sitting stock still, his hands still clenched at 10 and 2, staring out the windshield at a potbellied green—it *had* to be—dragon, so was sharpening its teeth with a small dagger.

“Chris,” Derek hissed urgently. The other boy slowly turned to look at him, his pale blue eyes wide and Adam’s apple jumping. “What happened to Loe?”

Before Chris could reply, a stream of obscenities issued from beneath the passenger’s seat. An extremely irritated gray frog appeared and half-crawled, half-hopped up onto the seat. It cursed loudly and aimed a fierce kick at a green crumb. Two blue streaks on each side of the frog’s head glistened wetly, the only spots in its otherwise unmarred gray skin.

“Well? Get moving!” the frog snapped. “They’ll be on my trail already.”

Derek and Chris looked at the frog, whose green eyes were flashing impatiently, then looked at each other, than back at the frog. “Uh...Loe?” Derek said tentatively. “Is...is that you?”

“Well, it’s not Lanus the Dragon-Slayer,” the frog said nastily. “Chris! Step on it!”

“Um...”

“The *gas pedal*, imbecile! Step on the—”

“No!” Chris snapped, his face reddening in anger for the first time. “I’m hesitating because there is a fat green dragon in the road, and he is looking at me, and I don’t think he wants to ask directions!”

“What? Impossible!”

“Hate to mention this, Loe,” Derek said dryly, “But I don’t think we’re in Wake County anymore. I’m not even sure we’re on Earth anymore.”

“Of course we’re on Earth,” Loe said, thin froggy mouth smiling condescendingly. “The land of Faerie is on Earth, just a bit to the left, that’s all. What’s impossible,” he continued, thoroughly enjoying their looks of astonishment, “is for a dragon to come this far south. They’re rarely seen further south than Uth, and never here in Corba. Lift me up!”

They stared at him.

“Lift me up, you empty-skulled—that’s better.” The frog crouched on the dashboard and squinted through the glass at the monster outside.

“Nitwit! That’s a wyvern.”

“I don’t care what *phylum* it’s in, it’s got *teeth* and it’s—”

“Wyverns are idiots, even dumber than Driver’s Ed students. Pick up that mug and throw it out the window.”

Chris just stared, so Derek pulled the mug from under the seat and threw it. The wyvern, hearing the smash, dropped the dagger and winged off, ears pricked.

“Now go!”

“What?”

“Drive! Gas! Accelerate!”

Before Christ could respond, a loud whine sounded, and something very much like a large blue floating cucumber landed. Derek just had time to make out a string of completely incomprehensible symbols printed on its side in gold before Loe screamed, “Go! Go! Go!” and the car shot forward.

Loe barely managed to grab an air-conditioning vent to keep from being flung backwards into the seat.

“Who are they?” Derek cried, grabbing the seat and glancing nervously backward. The blue vehicle was pursing steadily, and showed a dangerous sign of gaining on them.

“This is an ouroboros crossing,” Loe hissed, ignoring his question, as they passed a weatherbeaten yellow sign inscribed with a black circle. “I’m going to levitate the car.”

“You’re going to *what?*”

“Rev the engine and don’t stop until I say! *Alahidri,*” he intoned suddenly, in as booming a voice as a frog could manage, “*Orolonus leviatha!*” The frog clutched the air-conditioning vent and ducked his head, waiting for the spell to take effect.

The car sped onward, lurching along the bumpy dirt road. Loe’s eyes widened and he said again, a little frantically, “*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” Suddenly something huge, yellow, and doughnut shaped rolled out of the forest, heading straight for the car. “To your right!” Loe shrieked as Chris slammed on the brakes. “What is that?!” Chris cried, sounding close to tears as the car swung right, tires screeching but still firmly planted on the soil.

“Ouroboros,” Loe said. “Why...*alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” He was starting to breathe too quickly. “*Lumix!*” He swore. “*Solu. Ara roma. Boricha bala!*” Finally he gave up and screamed, “Those redeyes took my magic!”

Despite the fact that bagel-shaped yellow lizards were crashing all around them, Derek was fascinated. Magic. *Real* magic, not the fake stuff from shows. Of course, Loe’s didn’t seem to be working any better, but the faint taste of slightly overripe cherries hung in the car, and for some reason Derek was positive that meant something. *Pretty simple spells,* he thought, gripping the edge of the seat as Chris made a hairpin turn to avoid a baby ouroboros which came crashing through the trees. *Only a couple of words. Anybody could say them.* The car lurched again and he put his head down to avoid being sick. “Ala..” he whispered to himself. “*Alahidri...*”

“*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” Loe cried again, plaintively.

“*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” Derek repeated. The taste of cherries exploded in his mouth, and a green crumb rose up from the floor of the car and hung suspended right below his nose. For a moment Derek stared at it.

Chris screamed and Derek sat straight up. A gigantic green ouroboros was heading straight for them, and escape was blocked by another which had fallen over and was writhing in the dust. To top it all off, a loud whine was just audible over Chris’ hysterics and the crashing of the doughnut-shaped lizards, and Derek saw a flash of blue in the rearview mirror. “*Say it!*” the strange voice that had warned him about the cookie demanded.

He didn’t even stop to think. Fixing the image of the little dented Driver’s Ed car in his mind, Derek shouted the words. “*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*”

The car shook, groaned, and jumped rather ungracefully into the air. Chris abruptly stopped screaming, gaped at the ground at least five feet below, and gunned the engine. Miraculously the car shot cleanly through the loop of the huge monster which had been on a collision course towards them, one of the tires

just scraping its scales. Derek was strangely reminded of jumping through rolling hula hoops at birthday parties.

Looking down, Derek could see the ouroboros was really like a huge snake, its jaws firmly clamped on its tail. This one was staring at them with a stunned expression on its face.

“How do I get higher?” Chris asked urgently, looking around at the thinning herd of rolling lizards and the strange blue cucumber vehicle which was steadily gaining on them, while the little white Driver’s Ed car still hovered five feet above the ground, as if the road had simply risen with it.

“What?” Loe said, shaking his head. He seemed to be in a sort of trance.

“Higher! How do I get higher?”

“Oh...look up, and hit the pedal.”

Chris shot his teacher a skeptical glance, but did as he was told. The car gave a funny little thrum and the front of the car tilted up as if the hood were being raised—and the car leapt into the sky, the winding dirt road, the forest and its strange inhabitants, and the blue vehicle all falling away. A cloud hazed their vision briefly, then as they swam out of it Chris leveled out the car and put it in park. Before Derek could mention what a spectacle the little car must make idling on top of a cloudbank, Chris and Loe both turned around to stare at him with much the same expression the ouroboros had had.

“When,” Leo demanded, his amphibious eyes wide, “did you learn magic?”

“Oh,” Derek said, squirming. “I...I just copied you, that’s all.”

“Just copied me,” Loe repeated. “But you can’t have...without training...” He sucked in a breath of air sharply. “You must have a Talent!”

Talent?

“What were the words you said?” Chris exploded, grinning. “I want to learn magic, too! This is *sweet!* Tell me the words!”

“Alahidri...”

“We don’t have time for this now,” the frog said impatiently. “We have to go.”

“But we left the zucchini ship down on the ground!” Chris protested.

“They alerted half the province the moment they saw me,” Loe said impatiently. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve got the Beaters after me already...”

“Who?” Derek asked, but Loe ignored him.

“What’s a Bea—” Before Chris could finish, a gigantic black foot hit the windshield with a resounding *thunk*, cracking it. Yelling, Chris slammed the car into reverse and shot away from it.

“One hand at twelve o’ clock, other on the seat, looking behind you!” Loe snapped. Chris gave him a look. “It’s automatic,” he growled, looking a little embarrassed. The car shot off the cloud and past the black thing, into the open air. “That,” Loe said, a note of worry in his voice, “is a Beater.”

Derek looked back. Gigantic feet and hands dangled from long, thin limbs rippling with muscles. Crimson eyes glared from a head more insectile than human, and the edges of its icy black wings looked sharp enough to decapitate an innocent fifteen-year-old boy in a single swipe. Derek turned around quickly.

“Who is chasing you?” he asked again.

“Look,” Loe said bitterly, his tiny froggy hands pressed to the window. “They’re tracking us.” About a dozen more of the hovering blue vehicles had joined the first and were moving beneath them, matching their course and speed. And even worse, half a dozen Beaters were now tailing them, wickedly sharp wings glistening in the sun. Chris yelped and hightailed it towards the distant mountains, now just a purple smudge on the horizon. Loe swore as the inertia yanked him off the dash and into the seat.

“Loe, who is chasing you?” Derek shouted. He didn’t want to die or be captured by mysterious forces in another dimension without even knowing why. Loe still ignored him, being too busy screaming at Chris for being too slow. Derek had had enough. He slammed his fist into the back of Loe’s seat. “Tell me who is chasing you,” he said through clenched teeth, forcing himself not to shout, “or I will drop the levitation spell on this car and land us right in the middle of the blue swarm.”

Loe fell silent. Chris shot Derek a nervous glance, then returned to concentrating on evading the Beaters. Loe turned slowly and sneered at Derek, a strange expression on a frog. “You don’t know that spell,” he hissed. “I haven’t used it.”

It takes a different spell? Derek frowned, trying to think of another threat, when the strange voice entered his head again, whispering, “*Alahidri orolonus regeonum.*”

Derek grinned. “*Alahidri orolonus reg—*”

“STOP!” Loe shouted. “All right! It’s the Redeyes. The Guard. The—the *police*, all right?”

“A-ha!” Derek cried, thoroughly enjoying his new power. “So you’re a criminal! What did you do?”

“None of your—”

“*Alahidri...*”

“Please!”

Derek fell silent, surprised that Chris, not Loe, had stopped him. “Please, I’m kind of being chased by giant saber-toothed bats here...”

Looking back, Derek could see the Beaters’ wings slashing through the air uncomfortably close behind them. He felt sheepish and a little guilty, the adrenaline rush brought by his power over Loe fading.

“So...how do you beat the Beaters?” Derek asked. Chris swerved sharply to the right and, chin raised, swooped upward—but the Beaters followed without pause. The frog shot him an angry look. “I don’t know, I haven’t faced them before,” he growled.

“What do I do?” Chris asked again, panic in his voice. Despite himself Derek almost laughed, recalling that Chris had asked that exact same question, with just as much panic, the day before when he had taken a wrong turn and ended up in a traffic circle. How commonplace yesterday’s situation seemed now, how ludicrous their fears!

He scanned the horizon, then pointed to a bank of clouds to their left. “There! Try to lose them in the clouds.”

“It won’t work,” Loe grumbled.

“You have a better idea?”

The world went white. It was as if they had plunged into paint, so eerily blank were the windows, so shut-off they suddenly felt. Derek saw Chris gulp, a little unnerved, but retain enough sense to turn the car to the right, hoping the Beaters would just shoot straight through the cloud. There was no sign of them now, at least. Derek's mind produced an alarming image of the black fleet hovering over the cloud, waiting, watching to see where they came out, but he dismissed it. The cloudbank seemed very large—still they hadn't left it, still the windows glowed a bright grayish-white.

At last the clouds began to thin. Derek stared ahead, waiting breathlessly for the sky to show through. For some reason he couldn't shake a feeling of dread. The sense of not being able to see where they were going made him nervous.

He saw Chris shift uneasily in his seat, too. "I'm flying right into a dragon's mouth or something, aren't I?" he muttered.

"No, of course not," Derek said quickly, to assure himself as much as Chris. "Pilots do this all the time, right? All there'll be on the other side is sky, just like—" He broke off as they shot into the open sky and very nearly collided with a large purple carpet.

"Hey, watch it!" shouted the man sitting on the carpet, clutching its edge to prevent himself from falling.

"Sorry—" Chris started to say, wheeling the car around, when a wild-haired woman sitting astride a broom whizzed by a few inches from the windshield, shouting curses at them in a language Derek didn't recognize. Chris, though obviously scared out of his wits, recognized what in another world would be a lane of traffic, recognized that he was blocking it, and somehow managed to turn the car around and get moving in the right direction.

"Keep to the right!" Loe barked, crawling back up on the dash and securing his froggy toes in the vent again. He looked a bit sore, and it appeared Chris' last maneuvers had thrown him around in his seat. "You're slower traffic! Did we lose them?" he added, peering backwards.

"It looks like it," Derek said, scanning the clouds behind them. He scowled as he turned back front. "Maybe we should have let them catch you."

"Somehow I don't think the Beaters looked like they would ask if we were unwilling accomplices before dismembering us," Chris said darkly, bringing the car behind a green magic carpet on which a family of seven was seated. All the children were eying the car with astonishment.

"What is the following distance?" Loe snapped unexpectedly at Chris.

"Two seconds," the boy said automatically.

"Then fix it!"

Frowning, Chris let the green carpet shoot ahead. "Loe, it's a magic carpet," he said a little exasperatedly. "I was following a *magic carpet*."

"So?"

Chris didn't say anything, and in the brief moment of calm Derek looked around them carefully for the first time.

It was an incredible sight. They were suspended between two cloud banks, endless green meadows stretched out beneath them, the purple mountains looming closer on the horizon. A lake sparkled far below—and above it all,

floating about two hundred feet higher than it should have been, was an interstate highway, the traffic being comprised of magic carpets and broomsticks. Upon these unusual vehicles were perched riders of all shapes and sizes and colors, some who looked human and others who were most definitely not. The traffic sped along at, according to the car's speedometer, eighty miles per hour. Brooms and carpets whipped around each other, passing on the right, the left, above, below, and occasionally through. Curses, shouts, and greetings rang out from every side in lieu of horns as vehicles edged into the speeding lane of traffic, shot out into the sky towards mysterious destinations, invisible exits.

Just as Derek was starting to relax and enjoy the ride they caught sight of one of the blue cucumber cars again, this one outfitted with some kind of rockets, hovering to the left of the "road" ahead of them. A tall, thin man, dressed in a deeper blue uniform, red goggles pushed up on his head, stood perched on top of it, arguing with a young red-haired woman who stood even more precariously on a long, thin carpet printed with bright orange flowers and ringed with a lurid purple fringe.

"What do you know, Officer, I think I've left my permit on top of my dresser at home," Derek heard her say, her voice strangely amplified. "If you'll just let me go get—"

"Get out of here! Now!" Loe hissed frantically to Chris.

"No!" Derek said quickly. "We can turn him in! We might actually survive this if we do!"

Chris clenched the steering wheel in both hands, knuckles showing white at precisely 10 and 2 o'clock. He didn't turn off, but he didn't slow down, either.

Before Derek could try another entreaty the policeman looked up and spotted them—the white car among all the carpets and broomsticks was not exactly easy to miss—and ignoring the young rulebreaker's surprise he jumped back in his vehicle and shot towards them.

"WHITE HUMAN VEHICLE, PULL OVER IMMEDIATELY," the policeman's voice boomed, and Derek realized absently he must have heard the woman's voice through the policeman's microphone.

"Hurry up, you idiot!" Loe shouted.

Derek was about to suggest pulling over again when he saw a hand emerge from the cucumber car, a hand holding something that looked very much like a gun. Twin red lights glowed for a moment on the gun's barrel, and a moment later a bolt of yellow fire shot across the car's hood, leaving a scorched, smoking black swath across it.

"I take it back! We have to get out of here!" Derek shouted, but Chris didn't need any more persuasion. Chin raised, he pulled the car up out of traffic and towards a huge cloud. Unfortunately, this path appeared to be a heavily used exit, and after passing through mist for only a few seconds they broke into clear air and discovered themselves stuck behind what appeared to be this world's version of a camper, a man on a neatly trimmed broomstick pulling a carpet large enough to have, if it were cut up, carpeted Derek's entire house. The huge carpet was loaded with people, luggage, brooms, and what appeared to be an entire chimney, complete with *lit* fireplace upon which a goose was slowly roasting.

This “camper” itself was waiting at the end of a long line of vehicles, the riders of which all shouting and complaining about the holdup.

Chris hit the brake rather suddenly and headed quickly around the camper into the cloud itself. Just as Derek began to think they had pulled it off the car stopped dead. Loe was once again thrown, cursing, off the dash.

All they could see of the mysterious obstacle that had halted their escape was a huge gray hand pressed against the windshield, framed by several new cracks. They all stared at it, speechless, as slowly the cloud thinned and the rest of their assailant became visible.

A twenty-foot tall giant stood before them. Far from being jolly and green like the only giant Derek was acquainted with, his skin (if you could call that slightly transparent, fuzzy-edged surface that swirled and changed color with every passing gust of wind skin) was an ever-changing soft shade of gray-white, much like the cloud surrounding him. And the expression on his face, with the way his huge black eyes squinted in anger and his expansive pale brow was furrowed, could hardly be described as bemused, let alone jolly. An unbearable brightness drew Derek’s eyes to the giant’s left hand, where he clutched something that looked very much like a bunch of lightening bolts.

The giant removed his hand from their windshield, rightly assuming his appearance would hold his captors in place even if his hand did not. “You shall not pass,” he boomed, the sound rattling the car’s windows and making Derek jump.

“It’s a Thunder God,” Loe hissed as he inched out of the crack between the two front seats. “I would suggest you do what he says.”

Derek looked at Chris to see how he was taking this, and saw to his surprise a look not of fear but of fierce anger on the boy’s face. Chris rolled down the window with unusual vigor and stuck his head out. “Well, isn’t that great?” he shouted. “Thanks for telling me. I’m so sorry I can’t follow every one of your stupid traffic rules while trying to run for my life under the eye of a criminal being chased by police who are armed with yellow fire and metal bats, and besides your “roads” if you can call them that don’t have any lines on them so how could I know?”

He pulled his head back in and fell silent, fuming.

The giant was staring at Chris in total shock, and Loe and Derek were giving him similar looks. Derek snapped out of it first, realizing he could take advantage of this moment of confusion.

“*Alahidri orolonus regeonum!*” he shouted, and the car dropped like a stone.

Chris was rudely jolted out of his sulk, and he looked wildly at Derek. Loe was shouting something from between the seats, where he had fallen again, and blinding bolts of lightening were screaming past them, each time missing the car narrowly.

“When we clear the cloud hit the gas!” Derek shouted above the din. Almost before he had finished speaking they shot into empty air and a lightning bolt sheared off the passenger-side mirror. Chris accelerated and the car shot forward—but at a steep angle to the ground, heading for the rapidly approaching earth like a diving hawk.

“*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” Derek shouted quickly, and with another terrible jolt the car stopped its deadly dive. Loe shot out of the crack between the seats and landed on the headrest, looking very dazed.

“Well, that was an extremely amateur show of levitation skills,” he snapped, regaining some composure.

“Shut up,” Derek said bravely, anger flaring up. “I saved our skins back there!” He pointed at the twisted knot of metal that was what remained of the mirror.

Loe grumbled but didn’t say anything, and for a few minutes they just sat there, not speaking, recovering slowly as the car sped along through the air. Derek licked his lips, trying to get rid of the slightly sickening taste of cherries in his mouth. Finally Chris broke the silence.

“Where are we going?” he asked. “I don’t really care, Derek, about turning Loe in right now, I just want to get down and go home.” His hands were shaking slightly, and his T-shirt was damp with sweat.

“All right,” Loe said gruffly. “I can hide better on the ground anyway. Start heading down, but if you spot any Redeyes get up and to a cloud as fast as you can.”

Chris nodded, which made the car jump a little, then tilted his head so his chin nearly touched his chest. With a slight groan the car rotated until its nose was pointing downward. Chris hit the gas gently, and they began to float downward toward the ground.

They passed through a last layer of wispy clouds and the landscape below came into clearer focus. Almost directly below loomed a tall hill topped by what looked like a mansion, and at its foot meadows sloped away in every direction. Just as Chris was turning the wheel and tilting his chin to try and land on a suitable meadow, the car lurched, sputtered, and began once again to fall like a rock.

“Derek! What are you trying to accomplish?” Loe shouted angrily as he fell off the headrest into the seat.

“I didn’t do it!” Derek shouted. “*Alahidri orolonus leviatha!*” he cried, but the car continued its descent.

Chris halted his attempts at moving the car and stared dully at the dashboard. “We’re out of gas,” he said slowly.

Loe broke the brief shocked silence. “You imbecile!” he shouted. “Why didn’t you check the gauges?”

“I think I was a little distracted,” Chris hissed.

Derek looked down nervously. The car was heading down at a shallow angle—heading straight for the tall hill with the mansion atop it.

Xive sat up in bed reluctantly in her extremely small guest’s quarters, rubbing at her eyes. Sunlight streamed through the tiny four-pane window at the very top of her cell—ah, that is, room—landing, by incredible coincidence, directly on her pillow. *Or perhaps not coincidence*, the Curse-Taster thought darkly, glaring at the tiny shrine she had created on her bedside table (which just barely fit, wedged in between the bed and the wall.) The shrine consisted of three candles and a small picture of Kiada, Protector of Curse-Tasters.

“*Protector*,” Xive muttered in a not-extremely-reverent fashion, lighting the candles with a wave of her hand. “Yeah, right.” It was the last day of her week, and Lord Siron’s beloved Piral tree still stood as mysterious and rubbery as ever. Her employer’s health was deteriorating every day. He was so weak now he had to be carried from room to room in a chair shouldered by two servants. Xive had noticed several of Siron’s friends and relatives who had come to visit giving her dirty looks, and she suspected that if she didn’t cure the tree and quickly leave, she would somehow get blamed if—*when* Lord Siron died. *And that’s going to look rotten on my resumé*, she thought, then immediately felt a rush of guilt. She *liked* Lord Siron. He was kind enough, just desperate. He had, after all, provided her with a room (she gave the bedchamber a doubtful glance) and meals, and had promised (after getting over his first disappointment) to pay her even if she didn’t cure his tree.

“All right, enough gloom,” Xive said aloud, swinging her legs off the bed, throwing on a robe, and standing up. She gave her matted and messy red hair and sleep-heavy black eyes a cursory glance in her mirror, groaned, stepped into her sandals, and opened the door.

She was about to head down the hallway when her eyes fell suddenly on a pair of small gold candlesticks perched on a delicately filigréed stand, wicks burning with cool, smokeless, pale blue magefire. Xive doused the flames with a whispered word and picked up the candlesticks. Heavy—definitely real gold. And engraved with tiny patterns of branches and leaves. *These would pay all my debts*, Xive thought. *No more scrounging for work, no more cursed trees...I could even buy a nice magic carpet, two-seater, with gold tassels...and a—*

She put the candlesticks down, quickly relit them, and turned deliberately away. “No,” she said out loud. “No, no, no, no, no!” She couldn’t do that to Lord Siron. *Although he has enough of them*, she grumbled to herself, spotting another similar pair. She forced herself to forget it.

Xive strode down the empty corridor towards the dining hall, running her eyes with distracted interest over the exquisite mosaics that decorated the walls. Each scene portrayed some natural subject or other—one a sylvan glade, deep moss, tiny flowers and brightly colored birds created in tiny chips of ceramic, another a teeming ocean full of fish, whales, merpeople and even a kraken.

Xive’s eyes traveled upward and paused at a new mosaic she hadn’t noticed before, over the doorway leading to the dining hall, portraying a tree with wide spreading roots paralleling branches laden with pale blue leaves—

The Curse-Taster’s breath caught suddenly as she recognized the infamous Piral. She paused and gazed at the picture for a bit before continuing through the doorway into the dining hall. Why was this tree so important? It’s just a *tree*!

“Good morning, Milord, Milady,” Xive said, nodding at Lord Siron’s sister, who sat next to him, and taking the seat furthest from Lord Siron but to the left of the end of the table, as befitted her social status as a subordinate, employed non-relative.

“Xive,” Lord Siron said wearily, and her head went up, somewhat shocked that he had addressed her by her first name. His sister looked faintly horrified. “Today is my last chance. I can scarcely bear to hope, only to find my hopes crushed again...”

“You *must* hope, Milord,” Xive implored, a bit alarmed. Why *was* he so obsessed over this tree? She moved her arms as a servant set a plate of eggs and bread at her place. “I will not disappoint you today. I feel lucky today. I can feel it,” she lied. “Kiada smiles upon me today.”

Lord Siron smiled weakly back at her, then looked sadly upon his own plate (which also contained eggs and bread, but as similar to Xive’s as a phoenix resembles a sparrow—for his were peacock eggs, gently poached, and his bread laden with pomegranate jam.) He pushed the opulent meal around with a silver fork, then sighed and put the fork down.

“Cassus, you must eat!” his sister implored him.

“You know I can’t, Deirdre,” Siron said resignedly, running his finger along the edge of the plate.

“But you absolutely—oh, by the gods!” the lady’s hand flew to her shoulder. One of the straps of her midnight blue breakfast gown had inexplicably snapped. She hastily rose. “Cassus, if you haven’t eaten a bite before I return...” Her voice trailed off as if suggesting some type of violent action, but Xive, taking in the lady’s inch-long, perfectly painted fingernails and the delicate filigree design painted on her arms which looked as if it would rub off with a touch, was unable to see Lady Deirdre following through on her threat.

A slightly uncomfortable silence followed Deirdre’s departure as Xive ate slowly, feeling slightly guilty that she could do so. Her guilt was only increased when, upon raising her head, she noticed that Lord Siron was eyeing her with what could only be described as pure jealousy.

Xive put her fork down with a click. “Milord, please, will you explain to me what is going on here?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Siron said sullenly.

Xive sighed. “Well, are you refusing to eat because you’re not hungry? Or—”

“Not hungry,” Siron hissed in a whisper that easily cut through the rest of Xive’s sentence. “Not *hungry*?”

“All right, milord, I take it you *are*—”

“Not hungry?” Lord Siron crossed his arms over his sparse chest. “No, you’re perfectly right, Curse-Taster, your gastronomical talents diamond-sharp as always. Hunger,” he added, his voice rising to a shout, “is what *you* feel when the sun reaches its zenith, your stomach’s complainings that it hasn’t eaten for a few short *hours*. Hunger,” he roared, “*Hunger* can be cured by a slice of bread, a peach, a good plate of homemade stew—” He sobbed slightly on the last word, and Xive saw how speaking of food was torturing him.

“But I,” Lord Siron continued, controlling himself, “do not suffer from hunger. Oh, no. Who could starve surrounded by a feast?”

Xive thought of the candlesticks and felt a rush of guilt. Her chest felt tight as she watched the poor, tortured man. Before she knew what she was doing she had risen and was standing next to him. “So you literally cannot eat?” she said softly.

“Anything I take into my mouth makes me gag,” Lord Siron said simply. Xive frowned, taking in her employer’s sunken cheeks, skin laying in folds across arms and neck, like an empty sack rested over his frame, no longer filled with

flesh. She was no doctor, but she could tell that if he didn't eat, he wouldn't survive the week.

"Maybe...the food you're eating is too rich," Xive tried. She took up her own plate and tore off a piece of her plain rye bread. She saw Lord Siron's eyes focus on the morsel as if it were elegant cuisine, and to her surprise he took it and chewed once.

She saw his face scrunch up, inner turmoil plain on his features, and then, with a final grimace of pain, he spat it back onto her plate.

The very effort of trying to eat seemed to have exhausted him, and he slumped back in his chair, a few strands of gray hair which had escaped their tight ponytail scraggling over a face streaked with sweat.

"*Mistress Yaroon!*"

Xive jumped and snatched her hand back from Lord Siron's plate. Lady Deirdre was standing framed by the blue mosaic of the doorway, looking the picture of shocked indignation in a new, strawberry-colored gown.

"Get your filthy hands away from my brother and back to your seat, peasant!" Deirdre intoned, jabbing into the air a single perfectly manicured finger.

"Deirdre..." Siron rasped, exasperated. "She's a Curse-Sensor."

"Oh?" Somehow Lady Deirdre managed to pack an inordinate amount of meanings into that single syllable, ranging from scorn to disbelief to fury. "Indeed."

"Deirdre!"

"I...I think I'll go look at your Piral, milord," Xive said quickly, backing towards the door.

"Yes!" Deirdre snapped. "Do! Not that it will make any difference." One hand gripped the back of a daintily-embroidered chair, nails curving like claws. "You have one day," she hissed, "to prove to me you are something more than a mere commoner."

Xive pressed her hand against the doorframe, trying to control herself from screaming. "I do not aim to prove myself to you, milady," she said deliberately. "I aim only to cure milord Siron."

Siron gave her a look.

"...s Piral tree," Xive added quickly, deciding if there was ever a time for a quick exit, it was now. "I'll just...be out on the hill, then?" Without waiting to hear a reply, she backed out and legged it down the corridor, not even glancing at the intricate mosaics in her hurry to leave the pair of them behind.

"I don't trust her." Lady Deirdre's voice followed Xive down the hall. She wasn't exactly trying to be subtle. "She'd probably steal the silverware if we weren't watching. I bet she has a collection of little items stashed in that—"

Xive pushed through the door, face burning, and forced herself to walk towards the brown, drooping *Piral* tree.

She sat glumly against the trunk, tilting her head back and staring up into the sparse canopy. Picking up a dead leaf from the ground and shaking the dirt off it, Xive placed it on her tongue and tried again to analyze the bizarre, burnt-rubber taste. But it remained as mysterious as ever.

Angrily spitting out the bitter thing, Xive buried her hands in the thick carpet of lavender moss surrounding the tree and stared determinedly at the sky, refusing to start crying. This wasn't her line of work, after all. She was used to tasting river water, mostly, when villagers worried if it was safe to drink. Some food sometimes, though usually only noblemen worried about their food, and Kiada knew Lord Siron was the first—and at this rate the last—nobleman she'd ever worked for. *And tears*, Xive thought abruptly. She was sometimes called to taste the tears of an ill person, to analyze if it was a sickness or some mage's malice that tormented him. *I didn't think to taste Siron's tears.*

Xive suddenly became aware of a dark speck breaking the solid periwinkle blue of the sky above. *A wyvern, this late in the day?* she thought idly. *A roc? No, too small.* As the speck grew closer, she realized its shape was not of nature—rectangular, and boxy.

Curious now, she stood, fingers pressing against the tree trunk, staring up. She could now discern its color to be white, with strange shapes like eyes glaring straight at her. It was growing at a considerable rate.

Xive took a few steps away from the tree, mouth hanging open, a vague uneasy discomfort growing in her stomach. "It can't be going to—" The thing loomed closer, like a giant white bug in the sky. *It's going to hit. It's going to hit!* Almost without thinking, Xive's hands flew down and up in the instinctive circular pattern as she screamed, "*Torit! Torit!*" Power surged through her as a spurt of red flame shot up above her head, the sharp words of the universal distress call ringing in her ears as the spell amplified and repeated them.

She stared upward at the ever-closer object. Was it a vehicle of some kind? Some manner of devilish construct? Or a missile sent by the gods to punish a poor unsuccessful Curse-Taster who *hadn't* taken the candlesticks?

No. A vehicle. She could now see faces showing through the front windows of the thing, looking pale and scared even from this far away.

At the sound of a door slamming and strangled shouts behind her, Xive was jolted into action. This was not an attack, it was a terrible accident, and she had to do something to prevent it.

She raised her hands, then winced. She had never been much good at levitation and transport spells. *No time for belittling yourself. Now!*

"*Alahidri torilonus revathia,*" Xive tried quickly, frantically imagining the white vehicle backing away, slowing. "*Alahidri lentos!*" she added, then winced. She had just told the thing to back up quickly, then slow down. "*Ariet!*" she added, watching nervously as it loomed ever nearer. *Not working!* But just then the vehicle jerked slightly. "It slowed down!" Xive whispered. "It's going to stop!" She stared at it. "No it's not," she decided, and dived left, one final view of the pale, pinched face of a pale-haired boy clutching a hoop burned into her mind as she hit the ground.

It was only a few seconds, really, between when Derek had realized they were going to hit the tree and when it loomed huge in the windshield like some monstrous brown giant reaching for them. It seemed like an eternity.

Loe was lost somewhere under a seat, shrieking incoherently, his shouts occasionally peppered with distinguishable jargon, notably "two seconds behind"

and “steer right!” Chris, still clutching the steering wheel at 10 and 2, just stared at the growing tree. Derek was shouting something he could never remember afterwards, maybe a spell or a prayer or a plea for help. At some point he closed his eyes, until the first jerk made him open them again.

It was a fairly sharp jolt, throwing Derek back in his seat and sending Loe into fresh raving. But the car didn’t stop, and Derek realized they hadn’t hit the tree. He squinted downwards and managed to make out a figure in blue, hands outstretched towards them, standing in front of the dead tree. There seemed to be a purple column of something rising above her. It occurred to Derek that they were moving more slowly, and then they hit the tree.

Derek had thought he had known some pretty sharp jerks in his life—not only a few seconds before when the car slowed, but when he was trying to get to Algebra II in G-Hall, for instance, or middle school dodgeball, or his mother yanking him back when he was trying to leave gracefully and avoid arguments. But he’d never been jerked before.

A wrenching like the earth had been thrown off its axis, like the roller coaster had broken, like he was being pulled apart. A few seconds, twenty years, a horrible scraping, and it was over.

Xive pulled herself up just in time to see two strange things happen instantaneously—the white vehicle hit the tree with a sickening crunch, but instead of ripping a gash in the truck and smashing its nose in like Xive expected, the vehicle shuddered and bounced blithely off the tree, landing hard on the ground and rolling back a few feet. The instant the tree was hit a flash of blue caught the corner of Xive’s eye and she spun around just in time to see Lord Siron collapse, a terrible grimace on his face, clutching his side as if he had been wounded there. “Cassus!” Lady Deirdre shrieked, falling to her knees beside him.

The Curse-Taster bit her lip and glanced back at the tree—and saw something that made her gape. There was indeed a mark where the vehicle had hit—and it was a rip, but not in the tree’s bark. A flap of a strange, clear substance jutted out from the trunk. Xive walked forward and examined it, pulling at it. As she was trying to figure out what it was, the flap suddenly glowed a dull red. Xive dropped it quickly, and watched in bewilderment as the whole tree slowly began to glow red too. After staring at it for a moment, she heard a faint groan and gasped. The passengers! What if they were hurt?

She rushed over to the vehicle. Its nose was dented but not too badly, but the front window was all broken. “By all the gods,” she whispered, seeing the two children inside, the one in the front covered in shards of glass. “The poor things...” She hurried to the side and, after several tries, managed to get the door open. The pale boy was secured to his seat with some kind of strap. After pulling at it unsuccessfully for a moment, Xive sighed in annoyance and whispered, “*Ora couponis*,” holding the strap between two fingers. She did the same for the strap encircling the boy’s waist, then gently pulled him out, glass shards tinkling as they hit against each other and fell to the ground. The boy seemed to be knocked out—she pulled him over by the Piral and laid him down gently, hoping there were no broken bones. She opened the other door to find the second boy

conscious, though dazed and frightened. He unfastened his own strap by some method Xive did not see and allowed her to help him out the door.

Derek stumbled out of the back seat, little pieces of glass tinkling off him, cold against his skin. He barely looked at the red-haired woman helping him, so worried was he about Chris.

“Is he...okay?” Derek asked hoarsely, swaying where he stood.

Xive glanced worriedly over where the prone form lay among the Piral’s roots. She knew only about curse-related diseases. “Are you injured?”

He shook his head. “Chris. Is Chris all right?”

“He’s going to be fine,” Xive replied, without any idea whether or not she spoke the truth. She left the boy with his friend and hurried over to Lord Siron. Her head was pounding, and she wished fervently for a healer to magically appear, someone to help. She had never felt so helpless before.

Lady Deirdre was kneeling next to her brother, her forehead creased, one hand suspended over his chest, which was—thank all the gods!—rising and falling regularly. Then blue light blossomed under Deirdre’s outstretched hand, and Xive could have melted in relief. The noblewoman was a healer!

Siron’s robe had been pulled away from his side, and the silk undershirt pulled up. The blue damask was stained dark with blood, and a red gash was exposed, now glowing blue under Deirdre’s hand. Xive could see the skin knitting together again, but before Lady Deirdre could finish Siron grunted, sat up, and pushed her hand away.

“Cassus!” Deirdre said, managing to sound relieved and irritated at the same time. “Oh, Cassus, you’re awake—lie down!”

“No,” Siron said as Xive quickly closed the remaining distance between them. He raised his hand in front of his face and looked at it wonderingly, then looked up, past Xive, to where the Piral tree stood, branches still quivering slightly. Xive, staring at his hand, realized with a jolt that he was surrounded by the same red haze that still hovered over the tree. “Xive,” he said hoarsely. “Quick, in case it conceals itself again...”

Xive leaned forward, her lips parted, until her face was inches from his chest. Lady Deirdre made a sharp, disapproving noise, and Lord Siron ordered her to attend to the passengers of the white vehicle. Xive was faintly amazed that Siron had noticed the passengers despite his wounds.

The red haze filled the air around him, and Xive could taste on her tongue, once again, the sour tang of acid and the heavy, bitter burnt rubber. “I’ll be right back, don’t move,” she said, turning toward the tree. Siron cleared his throat as if to speak, but then collapsed back to the ground with a sigh.

Xive placed a hand on the Piral’s trunk, her fingers edged in red curse-light. Her hand strayed to the gash in the bark and she fingered the strange, clear flap like skin that had been sheared half off. It definitely wasn’t part of the bark, and had to be connected to the curse, but what did it mean?

“Something’s wrong with this tree,” a young voice, with the unsure pitch of puberty, said. Xive looked over to see the dark-haired boy who had been so worried about his friend. Deirdre knelt by the other boy, blue light playing over her fingers.

“Yes,” Xive said, a little surprised.

Derek didn't understand what he was doing. *Shut up about the tree*, he told himself. *Chris is hurt!* But some force made him continue. His hand darted forward and touched the gash in the bark. He tore a piece off the clear flap. *Taste it*, a voice he remembered prompted.

Xive watched in interest and surprise as the boy chewed. He ran his tongue over his teeth, eyed the tree critically, and said, "Plastic. It's coated in plastic." He grabbed the flap and pulled.

As if at those words the curse had finally given up its final attempts to conceal itself, suddenly Xive could see it. A thin layer of clear stuff coated the entire tree like icing. Xive pulled down a branch to look at it. "Suffocated," she said wonderingly, fingering a leaf. Coated with the clear stuff, the Piral could not breathe, could not take in water or nutrients. "You couldn't eat, poor thing," Xive murmured, then stopped short and looked at Lord Siron, who gazed steadily back.

"Help me," the boy said, cutting into Xive's thoughts. He was tugging at a flap of the clear stuff. Shrugging, Xive took hold of a corner and yanked—and like wrapping paper coming off a present, the clear stuff covering the tree came away and crumpled to the ground around the tree. Xive tugged again, and more of the curse-wrapping came out of the ground, scattering clods of dirt. *Roots*, Xive thought. Finally it was completed, and they stood before the Piral, tall and proud, already looking much healthier and happier.

Xive turned slowly to her helper. "Who *are* you?" she asked, but as she did Siron let out a gasp. "Milord, what's wrong?"

Before she could get an answer to either question, the air filled with shrieking sirens and ten Redeye vehicles landed around them.

Derek stared at the blue cucumber cars and his heart jolted, the last dregs of hazy shock fading away. "Loe!" he cried. "Loe! Where is he?"

A huge man in a deep blue uniform, eyes behind red goggles glaring, leapt out of his blue cucumber and strode over to Derek in one fluid motion. A gigantic, lethal-looking, black gun nestled in a holster by his side, one massive hand resting threateningly atop it. "Do you know the whereabouts of escaped convict Loerath di Uragana?" the man boomed.

When Derek only stared, he continued. "Also known as Jom Blue Ears, Alan the Rat, Staman Writhgar, Billy the Bubbler, Blue Bigsy—"

"He's in the car, I think," Derek said quickly, recovering from his surprise. "I...I don't know if he's...alive."

Immediately the driver's ed car was surrounded by Redeyes, guns cocked, muscles tense. The cop who had questioned Derek laughed briefly, a cold laugh that sent a shiver up Derek's spine. "Don't overreact, boys. He is, after all, a frog, and an unconscious one most likely."

The Redeyes all lowered their guns, trying to look as if they had planned to all along. "Flush the convict out, sergeant?" a cop with three large medals pinned to his uniform suggested.

At the sergeant's nod, the thrice-decorated Redeye holstered his gun, then seized the right passenger door, ripped it off its hinges, and flung it aside.

"Doesn't like handles, I suppose?" Derek murmured, wide-eyed. In a minute the Redeye was holding Loe aloft, his little gray froglegs dangling limply.

“Healer!” the sergeant barked, and Deirdre stood, her demeanor filled with haughty irritation, but she walked over to the car after darting a final worried glance at Chris’ prone form. She took the little limp gray body carefully in her hands, but after only glancing at the frog for a second, looked up sharply.

“A convict? You—”

“Heal him.”

Deirdre, her lips compressed tightly together, probed the frog with her finger. “He’s dead,” she said shortly. “Nothing I can do.” She handed him back to the decorated Redeye.

The sergeant swore under his breath. “Oh well. You can at least tell Smithson his dimensional-transport cookie trick worked for once. He won’t be causing any more trouble now. And...we do have his accomplices.” He turned forbiddingly to Derek.

“No! No!” Derek started frantically, eyes on the huge hand resting on the gun. “You see, sir, he was our teacher...” As quickly and completely as he could, Derek explained everything. “So...I suppose you sent the cookies, to trick him into coming back here, so you could turn him into a frog...but, sir, why was he in our, uh, dimension anyway?”

The sergeant snorted. “Would you prefer to live your life out as a frog?”

“All convicts are turned to frogs,” Xive explained, coming up behind Derek, as the sergeant offered no more information. “And their magic is taken away. So they won’t be a threat, even if they manage to escape prison. In Dimension—” She paused and surveyed Derek for a moment. “In Dimension Seventeen, the enchantments no longer applied. Neither could he use his magic,” she added thoughtfully, “but I suppose Blue Ears found plenty of mischief to get into nevertheless.”

“That was Jom Blue Ears?” Lady Deirdre said, somewhat impressed. “The one who launched a tirade against eccentric creatures who didn’t fit his idiotic little standards—” She stopped short with a small gasp, but didn’t offer to share her discovery, instead moving quickly back to tend Chris, after shooting a meaningful look at her brother.

Derek had been so busy remembering all the crimes that had hit front page recently, from smuggling to identity theft to murder, and wondering which ones Loe was responsible for, that he hadn’t noticed the tall, gray-haired, blue-robed man walk up next to him until a heavy hand touched his shoulder.

“You are lucky, Xive,” Lord Siron said, “that there was another Curse-Taster riding in the vehicle that hit me. Me—my tree,” he added quickly, but Xive was too busy looking at Derek to notice.

“A Curse-Taster?” she murmured. “From D-17?”

“A what?” Derek asked, thoroughly confused.

Then a groan issued from behind them, and they turned to see Chris sitting up, a hand to his head. “What—what happened?”

“Good,” the sergeant barked. “He has recovered. If you will allow us, then, healer, we will take the Seventeens to the station and send them back immediately. We can’t risk contamination, after all.”

“Send us back?” Derek asked quickly. “Back where?”

“It’s not as if anyone would believe anything they said,” Lady Deirdre said, helping Chris stand. “But I’ve done all I can do, and they do need to return.”

“What? But I haven’t—”

“Come along, Seventeen,” the decorated Redeye said to Derek, cutting him off and pulling him towards one of the blue vehicles.

“Wait,” Xive cried, running forward. A new Curse-Taster, untrained but with marvelous talent and incredible intuitive powers, and of all things a *Seventeen*, and she couldn’t even talk to him? “Don’t go, I—I don’t even know your name!”

“Derek. Derek Baker,” he had time to shout, and then they were gone.

As the dust settled, Xive sighed as she watched the Redeye vehicles lift off and shoot away. A rustle over her head caught her attention, and she glanced up to see the Piral already putting out new leaves of a bright, healthy blue, its disease healing exponentially as was the way of all curse-born ailments. Seeing the tree made her remember what she had been thinking before the Redeyes had distracted her.

“Lord Siron.” He turned around. “Milord, I—”

“Of course, Mistress Yaroon.” In an instant he was back to formality and business. “Your pay. As soon as Deirdre is satisfied that I—”

“No,” Xive interrupted. “That isn’t it. Milord—you’re a dryad, aren’t you.”

A heavy silence. Siron sighed heavily. “Well, you’re half right. I am.”

“Cassus, do stop being so cryptic! He’s half dryad,” Lady Deirdre explained. “A prince on a hunt came across our mother in a wood, during the Autumestival when dryads leave their trees...” She shrugged.

Xive stared at them, looking from one face to the other. “And you, are you really his sister? Milady.”

“I am, but by some quirk of genetics I am unbound to any tree. Connected to all trees, in a way, but not bound. That is, actually, where my healing powers come from—I can minister any remedies that trees’ leaves, bark, or fruit can, by my will.” Lady Deirdre seemed much friendlier towards Xive now, as if the crisis had changed her.

“There were three children,” Siron offered. “Deirdre—unbound. Myself—bound, yet only partly; I can leave my tree, but cannot travel farther than two leagues away from it. And I cannot live merely on sunlight as true dryads can, but need more solid food.” At the mention of food, a grimace crossed Siron’s face, and his stomach rumbled.

“And the third child?” Xive ventured as they continued the conversation in the dining-hall.

“Analee,” Lord Siron said around a leg of mutton. “A true dryad.”

Xive sat for a moment, digesting it all. “But...there are no male dryads, are there? So they must be immortal.”

“No males,” Lady Deirdre confirmed. “And unfortunately, we do not seem to have inherited the useful trait of avoiding aging.”

“You have hit on the main problem, however,” Lord Siron said, pushing aside his first plate and loading a second with blueberry pie, rabbit, cheese, thick

rye bread and olives. “There are no male dryads. And certainly no non-humans in the royal family. I, therefore, pose a problem.”

“But why?”

Siron and Deirdre exchanged looks. “The White Order,” Siron said through a mouthful of olives. “Seeking to—what do they call it?—purify the land of Faerie and destroy all breakers of tradition.”

“Jom Blue Ears—or whatever his name is—just crashed into his own handiwork,” Lady Deirdre said grimly. “If we had known he had escaped from jail, it would have been obvious who was behind the curse. He leads—led—the White Order. It has been all Cassus and I could do to keep our past secret from him and his minions.”

“But no longer!” Lord Siron smashed his wine goblet on the table. “No more hiding and cringing! From this day forward I will let the world know who I am, and be proud of it!” Furiously, he attacked his pie.

Xive and Deirdre both watched him, slightly alarmed. Slowly Xive began to smile. “That’s the spirit, Milord. Shove that White Order’s prejudice up their—noses,” she finished quickly, at a glare from Deirdre.

Lord Siron paused midway through a thick slice of bread spread heavily with jam to grin at her. “I think I will. I really think I will.”

They sat for a few minutes, silent except for munching and slurping, and then Xive pushed her chair back and reluctantly stood up. “Well...I suppose I really should be leaving. My mother will be thrilled that one of my jobs actually worked out. Maybe she’ll stop pestering me to get a job as a scribe or marry some rich earl.”

“Oh, must you leave so soon?” Lord Siron set down his bread and dug in his blue robes, finally coming up with a bulging red purse, which he tossed to Xive. She caught it, staring at the gold stars glinting inside. She protested, but not too much—she could fix her mother’s roof at last, and maybe buy a horse, and dresses for her sister! Before she had fully recovered from this windfall, Deirdre handed her two amulets, silver trees with spreading branches strung on leather thongs, a single green stone glinting in each tree’s crown.

“Clutch the amulet when you are in danger, and any nearby dryads will come to your aid,” Deirdre explained. “Give the second to that Seventeen boy, if you ever see him again.”

Lord Siron cut off Xive’s stammered thanks with a wave. “If there’s anything else we can do for you, anything at all—”

Xive started to shake her head, then paused. “Well...there is one thing.”

Humming softly, Xive packed her few belongings in a duffel bag. Before stowing away the small picture of Kiada, she lit the candles and whispered a quick prayer of apology and thanks. Was it her imagination, or did the goddess seem to be smirking as she was packed away?

After checking to make sure the official permit allowing inter-dimensional communication was still carefully secreted inside Xive’s cloak, she gave the tiny room a final affectionate glance and strode down the mosaic-lined corridor.

EPILOGUE

Derek stared gloomily at his computer screen, which had a background today of a wizard, staff raised and green lightning crackling towards a soaring dragon overhead. He opened his email program and gazed out his bedroom window without seeing anything as his modem dialed.

It had been three months since he and Chris had stepped through a mysterious portal in the Redeyes' station and found themselves in the middle of a field out behind the Buffalo Lanes bowling alley. Luckily they had startled only a crow. Since then Derek's life had been gray and boring, back to algebra and getting shoved in the halls, to crumpled beer cans in his grandmother's flower garden thrown by cars screeching by, to pollution and gritty streets and bulldozed woods.

Three messages. With a sigh Derek clicked on the first. It was from Chris, who was friendly enough with Derek but always refused invitations to go to a movie or skating or anything. But he emailed once a week—which, embarrassingly, made him one of Derek's closest friends. He had never really gotten along with the kids around here, and less now if he tried to describe the wonderful world he had visited and what had happened there. He was labeled a freak, a witch if he was stupid enough to mention magic.

Chris' letter wasn't just to Derek, but to all his friends at once. He gushed about finally getting his driver's license. Derek read in interest that during Chris' driving test, a truck carrying huge tires in front of him had spilled its load, tires bouncing all over the road. The DMV officer had been amazed at how well Chris had handled the situation, dodging tires neatly and even managing to slip *through* one. Derek smiled despite himself, remembering the oroborous crossing.

In the rest of the email Chris talked about parties Derek hadn't been invited to, so he deleted it. He moved a piece of paper that had been stuck under the mousepad, then sighed when he noticed what it was. The new Jobline, a listing of jobs open for teenagers this month. His grandmother had finally noticed Derek's depression and was urging him to get a summer job to keep him busy. With a grunt, he threw the paper on the floor. Working at Food Lion wasn't going to ease his desire to return to the magical world.

The subject of the second email was "Attract any man after two hours of treatment. Guaranteed!" Derek raised an eyebrow and deleted it. The third email was from someone he didn't recognize. XYaroon@faerie.net. He shrugged and opened it.

Derek Baker—

Do you remember me, Xive Yaroon, the Curse-Taster whose job you saved last week? Or—the time will be different for you, I suppose. You saved the Piral tree and my employer's life, and I thank you. If Kiada hadn't sent you my way...

I am contacting you because of the incredible talent I saw you display that day, talent that would be wasted in magicless D-17. Now, of course, I'm sure you probably don't want to leave your dimension for such a strange, alien place as Faerie, but if you do...well, work has really picked up for me, I have a

huge offer to go solve curses over in Uth. Some kingdom has been put to sleep and surrounded by briars, I hear, and a prince turned into a monster for crossing a witch, plus seven boys turned into swans—the job market is bursting! And suddenly I'm the most desirable Curse-Sensor west of Oranth, second only to Riyan the Eye. It's a lot of work...and I can't do it alone. I could really use a young, talented apprentice to help me.

Oh, and by the way, the greatest magic school in Dimensions Seven through Twenty is in Uth—thought you might want to know.

Drop me a line if you're at all interested, I'll go by the Redeye station and check this—what do you call it, i-mail, was it—once a week or so until I leave for Uth next month. Hope to hear from you—

Gratitude forever and Kiada bless,

Xive Yaroon

Dimension Twelve (Faerie)

For a moment Derek just stared at the email. Then he slowly started to smile. Now there was a summer job that *would* break him out of depression. Plus, he had decided long ago he wanted to go to college out of state. “And it's not far, really,” he said to himself. “Just a little to the left.”

But...how would he get there? And his time apparently moved much faster—what if he could only stay a day? And what if—

Oh, stop worrying, a familiar voice told him. *I'll handle everything. Transport's no problem, and you'll return just when you want to.*

Derek jumped. “Who are you?” he cried.

He thought he heard the voice giggle. *Name's Kiada. Ask Xive, she'll explain. Now, shouldn't you answer that letter?*

Derek grinned and grasped the mouse. “Land of Faerie,” he announced, typing a quick, excited reply, “here I come!” He clicked *send*, and the email vanished, zooming across telephone and magical lines to his new future.