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Just as Clothilde was about to open the door there was a small scuffling noise and then the sound of Bertie's familiar soft voice.

'I thought perhaps you girls might want to use this,' she said.

Clothilde and Effie turned. In her arms Bertie was holding the most beautiful rug Effie had ever seen. It had been carefully woven in soft Otherworld yarns, and its unusual colours were interspersed with gold, turquoise and pink. It looked both brand new and a million years old. From the way Bertie was holding it, it seemed a lot more important than other rugs.

Clothilde gasped and put down her basket.

'You didn't!' she said. 'How long have you been working on this?'

'Oh, only the last year or so,' said Bertie shyly. 'I had a fancy that you could be using one, especially when I heard you had plans to take the young one out more often. Do you like it?'

'Like it!' said Clothilde. 'Oh, Bertie, I simply adore it! But it

must have taken you much longer than a year. It's exquisite. Look at all the perfect little stitches. Did you do it all on your own?'

'I did,' said Bertie, nodding proudly. 'Course, it was the magic that took the longest. But anyway, now it should be fully charged with around a hundred or so moons of flying time. That'll be enough to last a good long while. When it starts to wane, bring it back to me and I'll recharge it for you.'

'A flying carpet?' said Effie.

Clothilde nodded. 'Yes, made especially for us! Isn't Bertie magnificent?'

'Absolutely!' said Effie, grinning. 'Can we try it out now?'

'Of course,' said Clothilde. 'I might just go and get my— Hold this!'

Clothilde gave Effie the rug and ran lightly up the stairs. When she returned she was wearing a necklace with a large shiny green gemstone in it.

'What's that?' Effie asked.

'Greenstone,' said Clothilde. 'Perhaps you call it jade, or *pounamu*.' She touched it, and it almost seemed to glow.

'Is it a boon?' asked Effie.

'Yes,' said Clothilde. 'I hardly ever get to use all my explorer boons, because I so rarely go out. I mean, I do use them in the Great Library but that's in quite a different way and . . .' She blushed. 'I've always dreamed of having my own magic carpet. Only explorers can fly them, you see.'

'I didn't know you were an explorer,' said Effie. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

Effie had gone through a phase of being quite obsessed with everyone's *kharakter* and art. She'd quizzed all members of the

Truelove household – including Bertie and the gardeners – and knew that Rollo, Clothilde’s brother, was a scholar engineer and Pelham Longfellow was a hunter witch. Bertie was an elysian hedgewitch. Cosmo was a wizard, of course, which meant he was now every *kharakter* and art at once, but Effie had got him to tell her about his time as a young cleric guide. Her cousin, however, had always found some way of avoiding having this conversation with Effie.

Clothilde shrugged. ‘Everyone laughs when I tell them I’m an explorer because all I do is stay at home. And my art is elysian, which no one really understands, and some people even find quite funny. Elysians give pleasure to others, you see, but they also like pleasurable things themselves, and so people worry they’ll become lazy and self-centred, which is obviously a terrible thing. When we were young, Rollo said I was useless, that I’d never be any good as a Keeper. Once he said that all I was good for was making chocolates and helping in the kitchen. And that one day I’d be so fat I wouldn’t be able to leave the house!’ Clothilde laughed at the end of all this. But Effie could tell that she hadn’t always found it amusing. Perhaps she didn’t even now.

‘He was such a cruel child. He’s a lot better now,’ added Bertie.

‘Anyway,’ said Clothilde brightly. ‘We mustn’t hang around here all day! We’ve got a magic carpet to try out.’

‘Here’s a little something for the child, too,’ said Bertie, holding out another package. This one was wrapped in turquoise tissue paper. ‘In case it’s cold up there.’

Effie took the package from Bertie and unwrapped it. Inside was a beautiful, shimmering light gold cloak, much finer and softer than Effie’s heavy school cape, which had come from the

second-hand basket and had always smelled of whisky and moth-balls. This gold cloak smelled of flower petals and clear blue skies. It had a large, loose hood and two patch pockets. It did up with a big gold button at the neck.

‘I believe all the young girls in the towns have them,’ said Bertie, ‘so you won’t look out of place.’

‘You’re so kind,’ said Clothilde, touching Bertie’s arm gently.

Bertie seemed embarrassed. ‘Right, well,’ she said, ‘the cakes won’t make themselves. Will you both be back for your afternoon tea?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Clothilde. ‘We’ll try. We’re definitely out for lunch, though. Pelham’s booked Anastasia’s. We’re meeting him there later.’

‘My my! You girls won’t be needing any tea after that. But I’ll save you some anyway, just in case,’ said Bertie. ‘Good luck with the carpet!’

‘Thank you,’ said Clothilde.

Effie followed Clothilde out of the front door of Truelove House and all the way down to the guarded gates.

‘You can’t arrive or leave without going through them,’ Clothilde explained. ‘Otherwise our enemies would be arriving on magic carpets all the time.’

But once they were through the gates, Clothilde unrolled the carpet and put it down on the warm, dusty pavement.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘I last practised this a few years ago, so . . .’

She seemed to be using her hands to pull the rug up into the air via an invisible force. Effie didn’t say anything while this was going on. She understood now that magic needed your whole concentration. She’d been practising quite a lot lately.

Clothilde soon got the carpet to rise up into the air. She and Effie got onto it. Immediately it seemed so much bigger than it had on the ground.

‘OK,’ said Clothilde. ‘Try not to fall off!’

‘I will,’ said Effie.

‘Probably best to lie on your front. That way you can look over the edge and see the view, but I can hold on to you if it gets bumpy.’

‘Bumpy?’

‘Air currents,’ said Clothilde. ‘They’re quite safe. Well, sort of. Ready?’

‘Of course,’ said Effie.

Apart from a couple of jolts when the air current changed as they flew over a large blue lake, it was a completely smooth ride. Effie felt that she could have stayed on the magic carpet for ever. It went pretty fast, but you could still see everything perfectly laid out beneath you. There were forests with little cottages in them, and two large castles.

Effie had only been in an aeroplane once, and this was completely different from that. It felt a bit like how she imagined it might feel to be a bird. Waves of air lifted the carpet gently in little steady puffs. Soon there were more normal-looking houses below, and Effie could see people walking down wide, tree-lined streets. Then, suddenly, at the base of a hill, began the thick, white stone wall that seemed to hold in the vast number of brightly coloured shops, houses, bazaars, markets, people, carriages, animals and complex passageways that made up the higgledy-piggledy town of Froghole. At the top of the hill was a castle covered in masses of tumbling pink flowers.

‘We can land in Anastasia’s courtyard,’ said Clothilde. ‘We’ll get a drink while we’re there and store the carpet in their cloak-room until later. Right, hold on!’

Landing was quite a complex procedure, made even more complicated by the sheer amount of things in the air above the town. As well as the many people on carpets, broomsticks and flying bicycles, there were also a number of miniature flying dragons, cats with wings, pink parakeets, hummingbirds and large glowing insects. Effie tried to be quiet while Clothilde navigated her way down.

Everything was so lovely. One shop was displaying golden urns in a pleasing jumble just outside its blue wooden door; another had hardback books with the most handsome covers; another had the most intricate, ornate cakes. Everything sparkled. Above one of the shops a long-haired man on a balcony played the saxophone as if he had been paid to do it for the entertainment of everyone below. It was the most pleasant sound Effie had ever heard.

Down in the streets there were all different kinds of people: old, young, fat, thin, male, female and everything in between. Most of them were a sort of light brown colour, but some were very pale white and others almost completely black. A few – Effie had to look twice to check she wasn’t seeing things – had extremely well-groomed fur. On closer inspection, Effie realised that several of them also had elegant-looking tails. And quite a few had small pointed cat’s ears, rabbit’s ears or whiskers. One man seemed to have a variety of small flowering shrubs growing out of one of his arms. It was like a complicated tattoo, but real. Everyone, without exception, was extremely beautiful.

Effie saw some girls about her own age standing in a group by a fountain at the end of the road. They all had animal ears of one sort or another, almost as if it were the height of fashion. Maybe it was. They were wearing capes a bit like hers, but theirs were white and tied with ribbons of different colours. Effie suddenly felt as if she might stand out in her gold cape, with her decidedly human ears.

Clothilde landed the carpet expertly on a sort of landing pad in the courtyard of Anastasia's café. No one seemed at all surprised to see a magic carpet landing. The people sitting at the courtyard tables were drinking cups of thick dark coffee or hot chocolate, or sipping pink, white or mint-green drinks through paper straws. Every table had a bunch of flowers in its centre. There were flowers everywhere, scrambling over the walls wherever Effie looked. She watched one of the large, plump insects go right inside one bell-shaped flower and then have to wriggle out backwards. Everything smelled heavenly.

'So,' said Clothilde, smiling, 'do you want a fourflower tea or a nut-cream frappé before we – as I think you might put it in your world – hit the shops?'

'What's a nut-cream frappé?'

'It's sort of cold chocolate milk with edible flowers. They make the milk from nuts and then put whipped nut cream on the top.'

'I'd love one of those,' said Effie.

She sat down at a table with Clothilde, who ordered two large frappés and some macarons.

'The macarons here are probably the best in the whole world,' said Clothilde, when they arrived. 'They're made from a very ancient blend of aquafaba and magic.'

Effie had never tasted anything like them. They were little round filled meringues in every possible colour, including some not seen in the Realworld for many years, and each one was sprinkled with edible gold and rose petals. Effie chose a yellow one. When she bit into it she found it tasted a bit like banana and custard, and the white cream filling tasted of chocolate and vanilla. The most delicious things Effie had ever eaten had been in the Otherworld, but this was the nicest of them all. She immediately ate another one, and then another.

‘Save room for some lunch,’ giggled Clothilde.

As usual in the Otherworld, they didn’t pay. Effie noticed how happy the waitress looked when Clothilde thanked her and complimented her on the food and the service. Effie realised that even Otherworld waitresses were very different from the ones at home. This young woman was wearing a pristine white linen apron over a soft black velvet playsuit and her hair was in perfect blonde ringlets. Effie noticed that she had a single blue flower growing out of one of her eyebrows. She had the air of someone doing her dream job.

‘I always love meeting other elysians,’ said Clothilde. ‘It’s just so nice to get out, don’t you think? I love meeting new people. Oh, it’s all so exciting! I’m so glad we came, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Effie, trying her best to ignore the fact that her headache had begun to develop again. It wouldn’t be long before they were back, and she’d be able to go home and recharge. Maybe she just needed more food? Effie ate another macaron and told herself everything would be all right.



After rugby practice, Wolf went straight to Leonard Levar's Antiquarian Bookshop. He didn't exactly think of it as *his* bookshop yet, even though he held the only set of keys. At some point he would need to call a meeting with his friends and tell them about how he'd been using it. But no one had asked, and so it wasn't as if he'd lied. He just hadn't said anything.

He'd been hoping to keep it a secret from the entire world, but that was difficult, given that the bookshop was on one of the main streets in the Old Town. The blinds were down most of the time, and he'd tried to disguise his comings and goings, but it wasn't long before the neighbours began asking what was happening. Or, to be more specific, one neighbour in particular.

Monsieur Valentin was quite old – at least fifty – and French. He always wore green corduroy trousers, for which he was a bit too tall, and walked with enormous strides even in a small place like the bookshop. He had a short, unkempt beard and smelled strongly of onions and kittens. If you think that kittens do not smell of anything, you have clearly never owned a pet shop. Monsieur Valentin did not exactly own the pet shop, however; he just lived in it. The Exotic Pet Emporium belonged to his wife. He did the accounts and worked, when he could, as a theatrical director, a profession in decreasing demand these days in the Old Town.

'And you are habsolutely sure you are 'ees nephew?' Monsieur Valentin was saying to Wolf. 'And you say you are looking after 'ees shop until 'ee comes back from Hantarctica? Mmm. I am beginning to hunderstand. But surely 'ee would 'av told you of our harrangement?'

Monsieur Valentin had a habit of leaving *Hs* off the start of

words that required them, and then adding the spare ones freely to words that did not.

‘No, he didn’t say anything,’ said Wolf. ‘He . . .’ Wolf did not find it easy to lie; he never had. But of course he couldn’t tell Monsieur Valentin what had really happened to Leonard Levar, or how Wolf had ended up with the keys to his bookshop, as well as all his other property and money.

‘Ee lets me borrow any of ’ees books I like,’ said Monsieur Valentin. ‘For my programme of self-himprovement. ’Ee sometimes borrows hanimals from my wife’s shop in return. You are of course welcome to do the same, as long as you return them hun’armed . . .’

‘No,’ said Wolf quickly. ‘I won’t need any animals.’

‘Well, I need my books,’ said Monsieur Valentin. ‘When did you say your huncle would be returning?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Wolf. ‘Not for a long time.’

‘And you are sleeping on this camp-bed, I see.’

Monsieur Valentin started walking around the shop, the slightly flared bottoms of his green corduroy trousers flapping around his long legs as he did so. He only needed to take three steps to cover the whole area, then he came back. Wolf hoped he’d stop, but he didn’t. He started again, this time looking at things.

At some point Wolf would also need to tell Effie what had happened to her grandfather’s old flat. He wished he hadn’t had to leave. Until two weeks ago, Wolf had been secretly living in it, and had held what he’d thought were the only set of keys (and, indeed, the deeds to the whole building, which he’d found in a filing cabinet in Leonard Levar’s bookshop). But then a tall

American woman had turned up while Wolf had been at school and moved in. Just like that.

Miss Dora Wright, who had once been Wolf's teacher, and had lived below Effie's grandfather, had returned to the flat below at exactly the same time. So Wolf had moved permanently into the bookshop. He was never going back to his cruel uncle, so he had no choice. He certainly couldn't risk adults or teachers finding out he was living on his own, or they'd probably put him in care. And now here was this annoying French neighbour asking him questions for the second time that week.

'What is this?' Monsieur Valentin asked Wolf.

He'd discovered Wolf's notebook open on his bed and had picked it up. Wolf rushed over and took it from him. He closed it.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? Hah. I see you are also hinterested in the self-himprovement.' He winked, and as he did so his beard seemed to crawl halfway up his face, like a creature desperate to escape.

How much of the notebook had Monsieur Valentin seen? Adults could be so nosey. Wolf kept all his lists in the notebook, and he made a lot of lists. They were all very private.

In the notebook, Wolf had a five-year plan, a list of goals for this year, a list of targets for each week, and a To Do list and a Training Plan for every single day since he'd moved in here (which was when he'd found the notebook, unused and dusty, on the desk). Every morning and every evening Wolf did fifty press-ups, fifty sit-ups, fifteen pull-ups (there was a convenient old beam for this) and three one-minute planks. He did sets of bicep curls and triceps dips and one-arm rows, using big books

– the Bible and the Koran worked well – as weights. Every morning he ran two miles around the quiet streets of the Old Town.

Wolf's list of MAJOR LIFE GOALS, which was written out neatly on the first page of the notebook, went as follows:

1. FIND NATASHA
2. DEFEAT THE DIBERI
3. BE A GOOD FRIEND TO EFFIE, LEXY, RAVEN AND MAX AND PROTECT THEM FROM DANGER
4. GET TO THE OTHERWORLD
5. BECOME A PROFESSIONAL RUGBY PLAYER AND/OR A MAGICAL SOLDIER OF SOME SORT

Natasha was Wolf's younger sister. He had no idea where she was, or what she even looked like. All he knew was that she was around nine years old, probably even ten by now. His mother had taken her when she'd left Wolf's father many years before, and Wolf hadn't seen her since then. But now Wolf was going to find her and give her a good life. In order to do that, he needed to be strong, and he needed to be prepared.

And he needed to keep what he was doing a secret.

'You do a lot of hexercise,' commented Monsieur Valentin. 'You seem like a tough boy, no? I wonder what you are doing, then, in a bookshop. Although I see you 'ave already removed all the major volumes that deal with war.'

It was true. Wolf had been digging through Leonard Levar's extensive collection of books on Napoleon, as well as reading Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and anything else with the word 'war'

in the title, and anything with pictures of battles on the front. He'd read the *Bhagavad Gita*, *How to Use Your Enemies* and the *Tao Te Ching*.

'And a lot of philosophy. What a strange boy you must be. I still think there is something hodd about you being 'ere, but I will hoverlook this for now, as long as you don't mind me taking a few books. You can tell your huncle that I will return them as halways.'

'OK,' said Wolf.

He wasn't going to argue. He needed somewhere safe for Natasha to live, once he found her, and since he'd lost the flat this would have to do. It was awkward, though, having Monsieur Valentin prowling around. Wolf would have to find some subtle way of stopping it happening. Perhaps using advice from Machiavelli or another great strategist. Leonard Levar's Antiquarian Bookshop was a very useful resource, and Wolf wasn't going to give it up in a hurry. It had a connected phone that sometimes worked, and an ancient computer on which Wolf could call up BBS pages, although nowadays these usually crashed after about ten seconds. But he'd found some useful numbers to call about Natasha.

There was also a good supply of paper, envelopes and stamps for writing to Official Records in London. Wolf had also found an extremely ancient microfiche system and various collections of plastic slides, many of which were creepy but fascinating, with titles like 'Records of Lost Children' and 'Missing Orphans of the North'.

It turned out that lots of children went missing every year, and Leonard Levar had taken an unhealthily detailed interest in

many of them. There were examples of children lost at sea, children lost on the moors, children lost in Quirin Forest, children who had been kidnapped by strangers or (more commonly) deranged family members, and a small but significant number of children who'd never returned from the Blessed Bartolo entrance exam.

The one thing all the missing children had in common was that someone had actually gone to the trouble to report their disappearance. No one had reported Natasha missing. But she had definitely gone. Wolf had been in touch with every school in the district, and not one of them had a Natasha Reed. Only one of them even had a Natasha, and she was the wrong age. Wolf's mother must have taken her a long way away. But why? And where?

'Ere you go,' said Monsieur Valentin, returning from the back of the shop. He dropped a large, well-thumbed paperback on the desk. 'This will get your tough little brain going. You can thank me later.'

The book was called *The Answer*. It was not unfamiliar. Wolf had seen it before in the Military Strategy section. It frightened him in some way, although it was impossible to say what this was. He'd read much more frightening-looking books, after all. He'd even dipped into the massive books he used as weights, and they were both terrifying in their own ways.

Monsieur Valentin was holding three dusty hardbacks. Wolf couldn't quite see what they were, but one seemed to be called *Preventing Apocalypse*, and another was called something like *Home Remedies for a Malfunctioning Crystal Ball*. But perhaps Wolf had read it wrong. It had been upside down, after all.

The door tinkled and Monsieur Valentin was gone. Only a slight smell of onions and kittens remained.

Wolf blew out most of the candle-lamps and found a book of hard Sudoku puzzles to take to bed with him. Great warriors needed to train their minds, too. And he found Sudoku strangely comforting.