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SPELLSTONE

ROSS
MONTGOMERY



WALKER
BOOKS



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For Honey



INTRODUCTION

IT WAS RAINING INSIDE THE THEATRE.

It came down in sheets, streaming from the chandeliers and turning the aisles into carpeted rivers. There was so much rain that it had nowhere to go: gathering in the balconies; flooding the orchestra pit. Sodden paper programmes floated on the surface like leaves as they were swept past the rows of spectators.

The audience didn't move. They sat in stock-silence as the rain came down in torrents around them. The champagne in their glasses slowly filled, and then overflowed, soaking into their suits and ballgowns ... but no one seemed to mind. No one even seemed to notice.

They were all fast asleep.

It was true: every single member of the audience was slumped in their chair, sleeping like a baby. One man had leaned so far forward that his monocle floated in his champagne glass; the woman beside him had leaned so

far back that her open mouth had filled with rainwater. Beneath the downpour, you could just make out the steady rise and fall of a thousand sleeping breathers.

Wainwright stood at the back of the theatre, gazing around himself in amazement. He had been inside many dreams before, but never one *quite* like this. He was so entranced that he almost forgot why he was there in the first place.

He found the others quickly. They were squabbling in the front row.

“Soaked! Absolutely soaked!”

“He said he’d be quick.”

“I don’t understand why we had to do this *here*...”

“Next time, *I* choose where we’re meeting.”

Wainwright strode down the aisle to join them, his footsteps squelching into the sodden carpet. He didn’t bother with an umbrella. He’d been in enough rainstorms in his life to know when it was pointless to try and stay dry. Besides, his boots had so many holes in them that they were already absorbing every puddle he stepped in. His overcoat was covered in patches, too. He looked like a man who’d lived on the streets his whole life, which was precisely the point. When you dress like a pauper, no one ever suspects you of being a magician.

He found the others huddled under their umbrellas. There were four in total. The first was a man of no more than twenty, gangly, pale and clean-shaven, shivering

beneath a cheap three-piece suit. Next to him sat an old woman, dark-skinned and elegantly dressed, brushing raindrops from the hem of her skirts with a tut. Beside her sat a young boy, wide-eyed and baby-faced beneath a neat side-parting, his hands patiently folded in his lap. Last of all was a very wet, and very angry, black cat. One of her eyes was yellow; the other eye was blue. Both were fixed on Wainwright with absolute fury.

“You’re late,” snapped the cat.

“Sorry – I got distracted,” said Wainwright. He nodded to the rainswept theatre around them. “Quite something, isn’t it? And all thanks to Rish!” He nodded to the young boy. “Can you believe it? Only ten years old, and he *already* has enough magic inside him to bring all five of us into a dream. Why, when I was his age—”

“Get to the point!” hissed the cat.

The old lady smiled diplomatically. “Lady Alinora is right. I don’t see why you insisted on us meeting inside a *dream*, Wainwright. I am a busy woman! I have things to do!”

The pale man sniffed. “I think I’m getting a cold.”

“We should probably hurry up, sir,” said Rish politely. “The dreamer could wake up any time – we might not be able to stay in here for much longer.”

That was the problem with magicians – they always took amazing things for granted. Wainwright sighed. “Very well, then. I’ll be frank.”

He cracked the knuckles beneath his fingerless gloves, ran a hand through his big orange beard, and leaned against the stage. The others listened obediently. Wainwright might be late, but he was still their leader.

“We have to face facts,” he said. “We’re running out of time. Vale’s catching up with us. His eyes are everywhere – all over the city. It’s only a matter of time before he gets his hands on the Spellstone. And when he does...”

Wainwright trailed off. He didn’t need to say any more. The magicians knew *exactly* how bad that would be. Wainwright paused. He had to choose his next words very carefully.

“I know I’ve asked a lot from you over the years,” he said. “As leader of the Order, I’m entrusted with secrets that I can’t share with you. That’s the way it’s always been – the way it has to be.” He looked at each of them in turn. “You may not always understand the choices I make – you may not even *like* them – but every single one is for our cause. To protect the world from what’s inside the Spellstone. And we can’t hide it from Vale for much longer.” He cleared his throat. “So I’ve made some decisions. Some big ones, in fact.”

There was another pause. The magicians leaned forward in their chairs, craning their necks to hear him better over the downpour.

“I moved the Spellstone,” said Wainwright.

The effect on the others was electric. All four leaped to their feet at the same time.

“You *moved* it?!”

“Wainwright!”

“To *touch* the Spellstone, let alone *move* it...”

Wainwright waved his hands to stop them. “I had no choice. Last night I was checking on it, in the usual hiding place ... and Vale’s men followed me. He must have made them more powerful somehow. They were able to chase me for longer than before. I couldn’t risk him finding the Spellstone, after all these years. I *had* to move it.” He sighed. “Don’t worry; no one saw where I took it. It’s still hidden – it’s still safe.”

“For how long?” said the cat.

She gazed calmly at Wainwright, her tail flicking. She spoke – as she always did – with the unmistakable tone of a duchess. “You said so yourself – Vale’s catching up with us. He’s getting more and more powerful every single day, and we don’t know why. Sooner or later, he’s going to find the Spellstone again. So how are we supposed to—”

“Hush!” The old lady waved her quiet. “Wainwright has his clever look on him. See! He has some plan to beat Vale. A new magician for the Order, perhaps?”

The magicians stirred. Finding a new magician was always a cause for celebration, and they had never needed one more than right now. It meant, for the first time in a long time, that there was some hope.

But Wainwright shook his head. “No, Campbell. I’m afraid you’re wrong. I haven’t found a magician.” He smiled. “I’ve found a *sorcerer*.”

If Wainwright’s first revelation had been a surprise, this was twice that. The others didn’t jump or shout: they stayed fixed to the spot, staring at him in shock. Then they dropped their umbrellas, one by one. Their clothes soaked through in seconds, but they didn’t even notice.

“I mean it,” Wainwright continued. “A sorcerer. The most powerful magician there is, with the strongest magic that I’ve ever seen, right here in our own city. Strong enough to defeat Vale, I think. Maybe even strong enough to... Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” His eyes were gleaming. “But I think she’s our answer. Our hope. We’re not going to hide the Spellstone from Vale any more. We’re going to fight back. We’re going to stop him, once and for all. It’s why I asked Rish to bring us here tonight.”

The others looked confused.

Wainwright laughed. “Don’t you understand? It’s so you can see her for yourselves.” He held out his arms to the theatre. “This is all *hers*. This is *her* dream.” He nodded. “Rish?”

On cue, Rish closed his eyes, muttered some silent words ... and the red velvet curtains onstage lifted, trailing long necklaces of rain. The magicians gazed over Wainwright’s shoulder, to the person who was finally revealed on the stage behind him.

It was a girl. She was barely twelve years old, wearing a top hat and holding a wand. She was standing ankle-deep in rainwater on the flooded stage. She didn't seem to notice the magicians: she was too focused on her act. She gave a grand bow to the sleeping audience, and her top hat fell off. It landed with a splash in the water and began steadily pumping out rabbits. She squawked and tried to stuff them back into the hat, but it didn't work. Then a shower of playing cards burst from both her sleeves.

"*Her?!?*" said the cat incredulously. "*She's* a sorcerer?"

Wainwright nodded. "The magic hidden inside her... I've never seen anything like it. I've been watching her for a while, waiting for the right moment to recruit her." He sighed. "We'll have to train her, of course ... and we won't have much time to do it. Not when Vale's already so close. But she came just when we needed her the most."

Onstage, the girl's head suddenly snapped up. She looked directly at the magicians, blinking with surprise, as if she was only just able to see them.

"She's ... looking at us!" Rish gasped in amazement. "She can *see* us!"

"Of course she can," said Wainwright. "She's magic. She just doesn't know it yet."

The magicians were speechless. Wainwright held out a hand to the girl onstage.

"Ladies and gentlemen – meet Evie," he said. "She's going to help us save the world."



PART 1

EVIE



1

EVIE

E^{VIE} WOKE UP.

She'd been having the strangest dream. She was doing some kind of magic act inside a raining theatre, but it had all gone wrong. The stage had been flooded; her tricks had fallen apart in her hands. None of the audience had noticed, because they'd been fast asleep.

Except for the five people in the front row.

Evie blinked, trying to remember them. She hadn't spotted them at first. But once she'd noticed them, she couldn't look away. They were the strangest collection of people she'd ever seen. There was a man with a big orange beard, and an old lady, and a boy about her own age, and a man in a suit, and a talking cat...

"Evie! School!"

Dad's voice cut off her train of thought. The dream faded from her memory like breath on a windowpane, as dreams so often do, and within seconds it was gone.

She dragged on her school uniform and found her parents in the kitchen. Mum had already started work:

her stuff was spread across the table, and she was dividing her attention between a phone and two laptops and five newspapers. There was never quite enough room for Mum. Dad was frantically making three breakfasts.

“Quick! Get that down you,” said Dad, handing Evie a plate without looking up. “I’ve got a meeting in five minutes. You overslept.”

“I had a weird dream,” said Evie.

Dad didn’t reply – he was too busy trying to knot his tie while stacking the dishwasher. Evie sat dejectedly down at the kitchen table, making a space for herself among Mum’s notepads. The house had been like this ever since her parents had both started working from home. Mum answered emails while having a bath; Dad did conference calls in the living room while wearing a suit jacket and pyjama bottoms. She went to take a bite of her toast and stopped. “This is peanut butter.”

“Very observant of you, Evie,” said Dad, closing the dishwasher with his foot.

“But I *hate* peanut butter.”

“Since when?” said Mum, still looking at her laptop.

Evie bristled. *This* had been happening for months, too. No matter what she told her parents – whether it was about food, or about school, or about *anything*, in fact – nothing seemed to stick any more. Some days, she felt like they couldn’t even hear her.

Still – being ignored had its benefits.

Evie cleared her throat. She had recently discovered that if she slipped something casual into a conversation, Mum and Dad would agree to it without even realizing.

“School’s cancelled today,” she said breezily. “I don’t have to go in.”

“No,” said Mum and Dad at the same time.

Evie groaned. Trust Mum and Dad to be paying attention the moment it mattered.

“But I *hate* it there!” she said. “I’ve been at that stupid school almost a year and no one even talks to me.”

“Nonsense,” said Mum, still looking at her laptop. “You’ve got loads of friends. Kiera. Jaya. That silent boy with the eyebrows.”

Evie stared at Mum in amazement. “Are you serious? Jaya and Kiera are in different classes to me now. I haven’t hung out with them in months.” A ball of irritation swelled inside her. “I’ve *told* you about all this!”

Her parents must have heard the hurt in her voice. Dad put down the plates and swept her in for a hug. Mum finally looked up and pushed her work away.

“Oh, Evie – you are a special, wonderful girl,” she said, squeezing her hand. “Everyone takes a while to settle in to secondary school.”

“That’s right, Squidge,” said Dad. “Just be yourself and you’ll find your people.”

Evie glowed. Mum and Dad always noticed the big things, when they happened. She just wished they noticed

the little things as much. She knew her parents cared: in fact, they thought she was great. She wondered if one day, they would realize that they had an extremely dull daughter who wasn't particularly good at anything. Surely, if she really was special and wonderful, someone else would have noticed it by now. "Love you, Mum. Love you, Dad."

"Now off you go!" said Dad, shoving her towards the door. "Don't forget your toast."

Evie stared at him. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Peanut butter."

Dad blinked for a few seconds, before the information finally registered. "Oh! Right. Er ... have a banana."

Evie made her way to the front door with her banana, grumbling. She had no idea why Mum and Dad were forgetting everything she said at the moment. It had started months ago – some time around her twelfth birthday – and it was slowly getting worse. Was it because they were busy? Or maybe she was just really, *really* boring? Or maybe it was...

She stepped outside, and the thought was instantly blown away in a thick wave of heat.

She gasped. It was even hotter than yesterday; she didn't know how that was possible. It had already become the hottest summer on record, and the city felt like it was about to crack. Weather reports kept saying that the heatwave would break soon – that it *had* to break soon –

but, day after day, the temperature kept on rising. No one had any explanation for it; it was as if something momentous was about to happen. As if something was stirring beneath the earth, rising after centuries of sleep.

She slammed the gate behind her and strode down the street, wincing at the heat that was seething off the tarmac. Maybe *that* was why Mum and Dad were so scatterbrained at the moment: thinking in weather like this was impossible. She tried to get her own thoughts in order. *School*. She really was late. If she wanted to make registration in time, she was going to have to go by the main road, and *that* meant...

Evie stopped. There was something sitting on the wall beside her that she hadn't expected.

"You!" she said, taken aback.

It was the cat from her dream – the *exact* same black cat, with one blue eye and one yellow eye. The memory of the theatre came back in an instant – the rain, the sleeping audience, the people in the front row...

Evie shook her head. It couldn't be the same cat. Just because its eyes were the same colours, that didn't mean anything. There had to be millions of black cats in this city.

But she knew, just *knew*, that it was the same one. There was something about it that was special. It was staring right at her, for one thing. It was weird, being stared at by a cat.

"I have to go now," said Evie. "I'm late."

The cat didn't reply, which struck Evie as rude, until she remembered that cats didn't actually talk. She strode away quickly, without looking back.

The main road was even busier than usual this morning, jam-packed with stalled traffic. The pavements were clogged with sweaty commuters, dragging themselves to work with blank, exhausted expressions.

Evie gulped, and took a final moment to collect her thoughts. Here it was: the morning assault course. She lowered her head, gritted her teeth, and stepped into the flow of people.

It took five seconds for the first person to crash into her. They didn't stop to apologize: they just kept walking, as if Evie wasn't even there. Evie lost her balance and was barged directly into the path of a cyclist, who knocked her into a woman who was shouting into a phone, who sent Evie sprawling into a stack of cardboard boxes beside a fruit and veg shop.

"Hey!" she yelled.

No one stopped to help her up: no one even heard her. Everyone strolled right past, as if Evie were just another empty box on the pavement. She fumed. *This* had been happening for months, too. Why had everyone suddenly become so rude? Why did no one notice her any more?

She staggered to her feet, pulled a banana peel off her shirt ... and stopped. Someone *was* looking at her – someone sitting at the end of her street, staring at her.

It was the black cat from the wall outside her house. It had followed her.

Evie shook herself awake. No, not *the* black cat – *a* black cat. Besides, cats didn't follow people.

She raced to school, keeping all her attention focused on not being knocked over. Even so, she made sure not to look over her shoulder, just in case the cat was still behind her.



Class had already started by the time Evie arrived. It didn't matter: her teacher didn't even glance at her as she walked in. They never did. Evie sat down, took out a book from her desk, and started reading.

Being overlooked certainly had its bonuses. Evie could read in every single lesson and no one ever stopped her. In fact, she could put her head down on the desk and fall asleep, and no one even noticed. Teachers never told her off; they didn't even ask her for homework any more. If Evie *wanted* to draw attention to herself, she could – usually by waving both her hands and yelling – but the effort of doing that whenever she needed something was, frankly, becoming exhausting.

It was the same at breaktime. Evie could join in with any conversations or games she wanted to, but there was always a nagging feeling that if she stopped talking and walked

away, no one would even care. Her old friends, Kiera and Jaya, were happy to chat when Evie found them ... but she always had to find them. They never came looking for her. And whenever Evie *did* wave to them across the playground, there was always a brief moment when they would stare at her, baffled, before remembering who she was.

It was a horrible feeling, and it was getting worse and worse every day. Whether she was at home with Mum and Dad, or out in the streets, or at school ... no one noticed her any more. She felt like she was in the middle of the ocean, watching everyone else swim away in different directions while she stayed exactly where she was. No one came back for her: no one even knew that she'd been left behind. It was like she had become a ghost.

The school day ended. Evie watched her classmates run off in gangs and pairs. Dad's words echoed through her head: *Just be yourself and you'll find your people*. The problem was that she was *already* being herself, and it wasn't working. Otherwise, she'd have found her people months ago.

Evie sighed. She didn't know if she could face another endurance-assault course back home along the main road. After days like this, there was only one place left to go.

The canal.

The canal had been important once. There was a time when it would have been filled with narrow boats taking goods in and out of the city, but then cars and tarmacked roads had made them obsolete. The old waterways had

been left to rot for over a hundred years. The cobbles on the towpath were cracked and broken. The iron railings that ran beside it were strung with cobwebs and littered with burger boxes. There was graffiti everywhere.

But Evie loved it. The canal was lined with houseboats, stretching for miles in either direction, their sides strung with tyres and old rope. The newer ones had names like *Fisher King* and *Galahad* painted in big gold letters along their sides; the older ones were barely boats at all, their paintwork cracked along the waterline and their windows smoked with dust. One or two had even been abandoned, left to rot along the water's edge, with ducks nesting on the deck between old tins of paint.

It was peaceful here. The city noise fell away the moment you stepped onto the towpath, leaving nothing but the distant pecking of moorhens and a hush of water at the locks. It was blissfully cool too, hidden down beneath the shade of the buildings. Finally, for the first time that day, Evie felt herself relax. She slowed her pace and walked along the towpath's edge, peering down at the water. There, beneath the rippling skin of duckweed, she could make out bike frames and old abandoned trolleys, gently swaying in the backwash of passing boats. They felt close enough to touch and yet strangely out of reach: an underwater graveyard of forgotten things.

That was what Evie liked most about the canal. It was a place for things that didn't belong anywhere else:

for things that only showed themselves when you took the time to notice them. She wondered what else could be hidden down there, in the murk at the bottom of the water, if you only took the effort to—

A bicycle shot past, so close it almost sent Evie flying headfirst into the water. She swung around to catch her balance, tripped on a mooring rope, and cried out with pain as her knee struck the cobbles. The cyclist didn't stop to apologize, or check if she was OK. He zoomed away without so much as a backward glance. Evie watched him go, outrage boiling up inside her.

“Don't mind me!” she bellowed. “I'm just a twelve-year-old girl, walking home! Don't make room for me or anything! I'll just lie here and bleed to death and—”

“Terrible, isn't it? Some people never notice anything.”

Evie snapped around. The voice came from much closer than she expected: from the man sitting on a bench behind her. She had no idea how she hadn't noticed him before – he was barely two metres away from her. And what's more, he looked absolutely extraordinary. Despite the heat, he was wearing a large black overcoat, a big black hat and thick black boots. All of them were tattered and threadbare and held together with patches.

But that wasn't the most extraordinary thing about him. The most extraordinary thing of all was that Evie recognized him.

It was the man from her dream.



2

THE STRANGER ON THE TOWPATH

EVIE STARED AT THE MAN ON THE BENCH IN DISBELIEF. It really was him – the man she had seen in her dream. He was wearing the exact same clothes; he had the exact same bright orange beard. Here he was, in real life, reading a newspaper and eating a ham sandwich.

“That’s a nasty scrape you’ve got there,” said the man.

Evie looked at her knee. It was slowly, confidently bleeding. The man offered her the paper napkin from his sandwich and nodded at the bench.

“Sit down, if you like,” he said. “Until it stops.”

Evie paused. She wasn’t supposed to talk to strangers. But she had always been good at reading people. She could pick out a friendly person from a hundred paces; she knew the difference between a dog you could pat and a dog that would bite you if you tried. And somehow she knew, just knew, from the moment she had first seen the man, that

he was nice. She'd known it the way you know a good peach when you pick one up.

Besides, he had somehow stepped from her dream and into real life – she had to find out what was going on.

“Thank you.” She took the napkin and sat down on the other end of the bench, as far away from him as she could. The man nodded and went back to his newspaper. Evie waited to see if he would start talking to her again, but he didn't. They sat in silence for a while. The words that demanded to be said swelled inside Evie's chest, bigger and bigger, like a balloon ready to pop. “I saw you in my dream.”

The man turned to her. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” said Evie. “It was one hundred per cent, definitely you.”

It sounded like an accusation – perhaps it was. Thankfully, the man didn't seem to mind. He folded up his newspaper and crossed his legs. “Do you always walk home this way after school?”

Evie's blood froze. How did the man know that? Had he been following her? “H-how did you know I'm walking back from school?”

“It's home-time,” said the man. “And you're wearing school uniform.”

Evie looked down at her shirt. “Oh yeah.”

The man nodded at the bench. “Well – I'm always here. You probably saw me while you were walking home yesterday, and the memory of me turned up in your dream.

That's what dreams are: bits and pieces of memories, rearranging themselves into a story in your head. *Dream-work*, they call it."

This man knew a surprising amount about dreams. Evie hated to admit it, but his explanation made a lot more sense than a person stepping out of her dream and into real life. It even explained the black cat from earlier – she could have seen *that* yesterday, too. "But you were wearing the same clothes."

The man laughed at his shabby overcoat and broken boots. "I don't have much of a wardrobe, to be honest."

Evie blushed. She was being rude: the man was clearly homeless. "Sorry. I've just never noticed you here before, that's all."

"Not many people do," said the man. "See?" He gestured at the people walking past them, looking at their phones. "All this stuff going on around them, and they never notice it. It's a miracle they don't walk straight into the canal, frankly. How's the knee?"

Evie lifted the napkin and checked. "Still bleeding."

"It'll stop by itself soon enough," said the man, with confidence. "So – what was I doing, then? In this dream of yours?"

Evie thought back. The dream was fainter than ever now, like the imprints left by sunlight when you shut your eyes. "We were in a theatre. It was raining. I was doing a magic act."

“Magic!” said the man. “Cards, rabbits out of a hat, that sort of thing?”

Evie nodded.

The man stole a glance over his shoulder and then leaned forward conspiratorially. “Of course – that’s not *real* magic. A *real* magician would never perform on a stage like that. *Real* magic never draws attention to itself. It hides in plain sight. And I should know!” He adjusted his coat with an air of self-importance. “You just so happen to be talking to one of the last *true* magicians left in the world. Consider yourself lucky!”

Evie frowned. “You don’t look like a magician.”

“What did you expect – wizard’s robes?!” said the man. “I’ll have you know that *these* clothes are just what a magician needs – they help me slip perfectly into the background, where magic belongs, so no one ever notices me.” He waved his hands above his head. “Oi! Everyone! Look over here!”

Not a single person turned to look at him as they walked past – they kept their eyes fixed on the ground, clearly trying to avoid eye contact with the strange man shouting at them.

“See?” he said, folding his arms smugly. “My magic’s working perfectly.”

Evie giggled. She understood what was going on: the man was pulling her leg, teasing her to pass the time until her knee healed. He held out his hand.

“The name’s Wainwright. Pleased to meet you.”

Evie paused, deciding whether or not to keep playing along. It was nice to have a silly conversation like this: it was the first time in months that she hadn’t had to fight to keep someone’s attention. She decided it was safe to stay, so long as she didn’t tell the man her real name. “I’m Sophie. Tell me, Wainwright, what do magicians do with their spare time?”

Wainwright crossed his legs. He was clearly enjoying this. “Spare time! What I wouldn’t *give* for spare time, Sophie. I’m far too busy protecting the world.”

“From...?”

“Evil magic! Dragons, ogres, monsters, that kind of thing.”

“I haven’t seen many dragons around here lately.”

“That’s because I’m doing such a good job.”

“I see.”

Wainwright smiled. “I’m joking, of course. It wasn’t *me* who defeated the creatures of darkness. That was Emrys.”

“Who’s Emrys?”

Wainwright was scandalized. “*Who’s Emrys?* The greatest magician who’s ever lived, that’s who!” His eyes were sparkling – he was on a roll now. “There’ll never be another like him, mark my words. He was no mere magician, you see – he was a sorcerer. A magician born with *incredible* magic inside him. If it wasn’t for him, the creatures of darkness would still cover this land from end

to end. Emrys was the only one strong enough to imprison their magic inside the Spellstone!”

Evie blinked. “Spellstone?”

Wainwright turned to face her, his expression darkening. “That’s right. The most powerful magical weapon ever created. When Emrys defeated the creatures of darkness, he took all their evil magic and stored it inside a stone – then he hid it from the world, so no one could ever find it. It’s the sacred duty of magicians like me to make sure that the Spellstone is never found. And for one and a half thousand years, we’ve succeeded...” His voice dropped an octave. “*Until now.*”

Evie giggled. Wainwright was good at this. “Oh dear.”

“*Oh dear*, indeed,” said Wainwright gravely. “You see, Sophie, there’s a man who’s been trying to get his hands on the Spellstone for forty years. A man who wants to unleash the evil trapped inside it and use it for his diabolical ends!”

Evie gasped theatrically. She was enjoying this. It was just like all her favourite fantasy stories rolled into one. “An evil wizard?”

“The most evil one there is,” said Wainwright. “His name is Vale, and his powers are only growing stronger. He’s been hunting me down for years ... after all, I’m the only one who knows where the Spellstone is really hidden.”

Evie mulled this over. “Don’t you have anything you can use to fight him? A wand? An invisibility cloak, maybe?”

“You’ve been watching too many films,” muttered

Wainwright. “But I *do* have this.” He reached around his neck and pulled something out from inside his coat. It was a piece of old metal on a worn length of string.

Evie frowned. “What is it?”

“You tell me,” said Wainwright.

Curiosity got the better of her. Evie took the necklace and turned it over in her hands. There was nothing special about it. It was just an old, ugly piece of metal, covered in rust. She wondered if she was going to have to wash her hands after holding it. “It doesn’t look like anything.”

“The most powerful magic,” said Wainwright, “is always the most well-hidden.”

The change in his voice was remarkable: it was almost trembling with emotion. Evie looked up and saw that Wainwright’s eyes were shining. He wasn’t joking any more.

“I did everything I could,” he said. “But it wasn’t enough. And now, I’m handing it on to you.” He closed her hand around the metal. “It’s precious. Take care of it. Never let it out of your sight. Keep it safe and keep it hidden until you’re with the others. Alinora will find you and explain everything.”

Evie was lost. She had been flung from out of the story they were making, and now she had no idea where she was. “Who’s Alinora? What others?”

But Wainwright just smiled. “You’re going to be very important, Evie. I wish I had the chance to see it.”

Evie was so confused that it took her a moment to

realize what had just happened. It hit her in a sudden rush of fear.

“H-how do you know my real name?” she asked.

Wainwright didn't reply. He wasn't even looking at her. He was gazing at something in the distance over her shoulder ... and his face had drained of all colour.

Evie turned to follow his gaze. There were two men standing on the towpath behind them, about ten metres away. They were road workers in high-vis jackets – the kind you saw digging up pavements all over the city. But they weren't ignoring Wainwright, like the other passers-by. They were staring right at him, as if locking him in place with their eyes.

The moment Evie saw them, she felt their badness the way ice burns cold in your hand. There was nothing good in these men: not a single shred of warmth, or life, or humanity. A movement suddenly caught the corner of her eye: in the distance, a line of people had appeared along the bridge. There were more road workers, and a police officer, and a businessman in a suit. They all filled Evie with the same feeling of cold dread ... and every single one of them was staring at Wainwright.

“There were so many things I needed to tell you, Evie,” said Wainwright, “but I fear we've run out of time.”

The sorrow in his voice was heartbreaking. He still wasn't looking at her. He was speaking quietly to her out of the corner of his mouth, as if trying to hide

what he was saying. Evie could barely hear him over the pounding in her ribcage. Wainwright leaned forward to stand, gave her hand a final tight squeeze ... and at the last moment, when he was close enough to whisper, he spoke once more.

“Tell them: it’s safe. The last place he’ll look.”

Evie’s head was spinning, but Wainwright was already on his feet and casually dusting down his coat. The two men in hi-vis jackets immediately started walking towards him; the people on the bridge began to move, too, quickly making their way down the steps to the towpath. Wainwright didn’t seem bothered. He folded his hands behind his back and strolled towards them, whistling. He was trapped: the two groups of men were closing in from either direction, like the jaws of a beartrap...

With a sudden burst of unbelievable speed, Wainwright spun on his heels and leaped over the metal railing beside the towpath. He was already tearing down the street on the other side before the men even had a chance to react. At once, they shot after him – and suddenly, they weren’t the only ones.

Dozens more men were appearing from every street and every corner and racing towards Wainwright, but he was far too quick. He dodged and darted between them like someone half his age, until he had spun down a side street and disappeared from view. The men poured after him like a flood, and in an instant, they were gone.

Evie stayed on the bench where Wainwright had left her, trembling with shock. No one on the towpath seemed to have noticed what had just happened. The men were gone; the strange encounter with Wainwright had ended as quickly as it had started. Cars honked as they crossed the bridge, ducks drew lines in the water, and the world continued on its course. The simple everyday fell back into place, like a blanket settled on a bed. It was as if Evie had dreamed the whole thing.

And yet...

She opened up her hand. There, resting in the centre of her palm, was the twisted piece of metal that Wainwright had given her just before he ran away. The edges had left an imprint on her skin in the shape of a crooked question mark.



3

ALINORA

EVIE WALKED HOME ALONE. THERE WERE NO FURTHER signs of Wainwright; no signs of the men who had chased him away, either. Everything was back to normal: the bridge, her street, the gravel path to her green front door. Dad was making dinner, as usual; Mum was exactly where Evie had left her that morning, only now she was surrounded by several dozen mugs of stone-cold tea.

“Sorry, darling.” Mum sighed. “I’ll be finished soon. Honestly, I feel like I’ve spent the whole day chasing shadows.”

“No one’s getting anything done in this heat,” said Dad. “How was school, Squidge?”

For a moment, Evie considered telling her parents about everything that had happened – about the men, and Wainwright – and showing them the piece of metal he had given her, almost to prove to herself that it had really happened...

But all of a sudden, she knew – just *knew* – that it was very important she did exactly what Wainwright

had asked. She had to keep it all a secret. “I had double maths.”

“Great,” said Dad, not really listening. “Want to help me with dinner?”

Normally Evie would have complained, but today she was grateful for something to do. She dragged a stool over to the kitchen counter and started chopping vegetables, focusing all her attention on moving the knife backwards and forwards and passing things to Dad. She could feel the weight of the metal in her pocket, growing heavier and heavier. She couldn’t risk looking at it again until she went to bed.

Keep it safe and keep it hidden until you’re with the others.

The words kept circling in her head. What others?



Evie ate dinner and watched TV with her parents, waiting for the earliest moment she could go to bed without drawing suspicion. Luckily for her, night fell faster than usual: a heavy, premature darkness seemed to be settling over the city, pressing in at the windows. The weather was acting stranger and stranger. She stood up, yawning theatrically.

“Phew! I’m beat,” she said. “All that double maths. I’m off to bed.”

Evie didn't need to bother pretending. Mum was too busy shouting at the TV to notice.

"Look at it!" she said. "It's an absolute disgrace!"

She was watching a news report about the latest skyscraper that had been built in the city. It was the biggest one yet: a gleaming stack of glass and girders, twice the height of everything around it. It got thinner as it got taller, twisting to a jagged point in the clouds. Evie thought it looked like the remains of a broken sword, rising up through the crust of the earth. The scrolling message along the bottom said it was called Tower 99.

"Ninety-nine floors!" Dad read, impressed. "You'll be able to see the whole city from up there."

"Exactly," said Mum bitterly. "Everything but *that* monstrosity. You won't be able to go anywhere without seeing the damn thing! That's what big money gets you nowadays."

Mum and Dad started bickering about architecture and civil planning, and Evie used the opportunity to sneak upstairs. She closed her bedroom door behind her, shut the curtains, and, for some unknown reason, checked whether her wardrobe was empty. Only then did she dare take the piece of metal from out of her pocket.

It didn't look any more impressive the second time around. In fact, it was even smaller than she remembered. She turned it over in her hands, looking for anything she might not have noticed, but there was nothing: no writing,

no markings, no clues about what it was for. She scratched it with a fingernail to see if there was anything hidden underneath the rust, but there was nothing. Its edges had presumably once been sharp, but now they were dulled and worn. It just looked like a piece of junk.

So why did it *feel* so important?

The metal felt more solid than anything she had ever felt in her life. There *was* something special about it: a weight that lay beyond its mere shape and size. Wainwright had told her it was important. He had said that *she* was important, too – but how?

There was a sudden slam against the windowpane. Evie nearly leaped out of her skin. She shoved the metal back into her pocket, without knowing why she was doing it.

“W-who’s there?” she said out loud.

No one answered. Evie stood still for a moment, her breath held. The very last thing she wanted to do was open the curtains and see if there was something outside the window ... but what if it was Wainwright, searching for somewhere to hide?

There was another sound at the window – sharper this time, more urgent. Something was scratching at the glass.

Alinora will find you.

Evie swallowed. She couldn’t just stand here, pretending it wasn’t happening. She made herself walk towards the window. Then she took hold of a curtain in each hand, paused to take a breath, and threw them apart.

There, standing on the other side of the glass, was a cat.
“It’s you!” said Evie.

It was the same black cat from that morning, scratching frantically to be let inside. Without thinking, Evie opened the window and the cat shot in at once, followed by a breath of scented night air. It jumped on the bed and glared at her with its blue and yellow eyes. Evie couldn’t help but smile.

“You know,” she joked, “I could swear you were following me.”

“Don’t be thick,” said the cat. “Of *course* I’m following you. I’ve been following you all day. I’ve been sitting in your garden for over an hour, waiting for you to come to bed!”

Evie stared at the cat in shock. In a day where many strange things had happened, this was perhaps one too many. People didn’t appear from dreams; strangers didn’t know your name; cats didn’t talk in a cut-glass English accent. Cats didn’t talk *at all*.

And yet...

Alinora will find you.

“Wainwright,” Evie whispered. “Did he send you here?”

The cat gave her a look that was indescribable.

“Wainwright’s missing,” she said. “No one knows where he is. And if he doesn’t show up soon, then the smoke-men are going to come here next.”