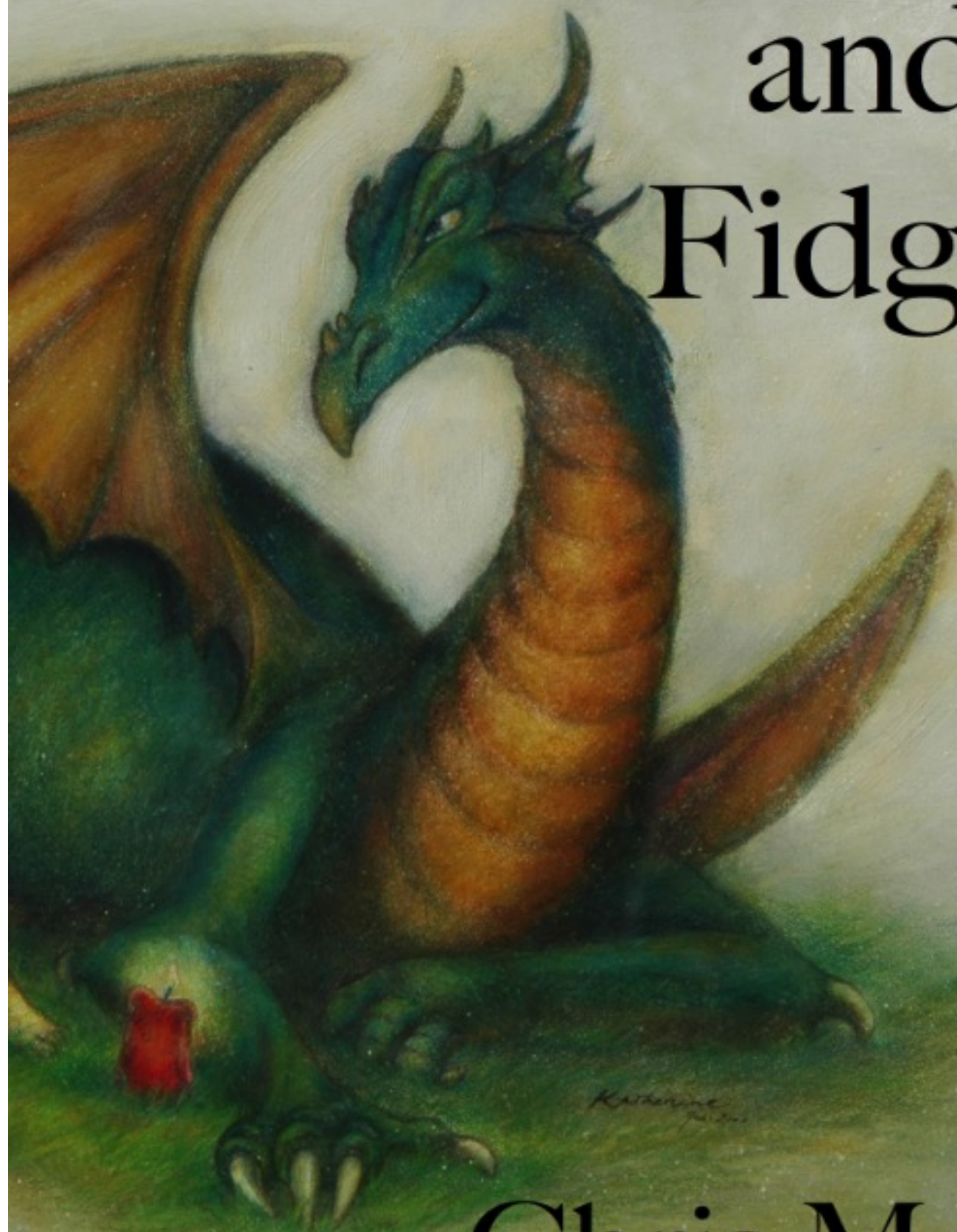


# Jazzberry and Fidget



Chris Mason

# **Jazzberry and Fidget**

By Chris Mason

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For Nancy

## Chapter 1: The Dream

Annie Rust dreamed that she woke up and found a fairy and a dragon sitting at the foot of her bed. It was still nighttime. Moonlight spilled brightly through the open window onto the model horse collection on her dresser, and the horsey shadows seemed to prance as the curtains shifted in the warm breeze.

For a dream, it was very clear. The fairy was about four inches tall, hovering over Annie's feet with slow beats of her butterfly wings. She was dressed in a short gauzy dress, and her dark hair was spiky like an angry rock singer's. This convinced Annie that she was dreaming: everyone knew that real fairies had beautiful long hair that blew loose in the wind. It would take a hurricane to ruffle the dream fairy's knotted tresses.

The dragon was the same size as Aunt Helen's toy poodle, but much less fuzzy. He had bumpy, scaly skin, big eyes over a pointed snout, and icky-looking wings folded back against his shoulders. He sat on the bedspread, up on his hind legs like a dog begging for baloney, scratching one pointy ear with the tip of a sharp finger-claw.

Nothing happened. Annie sat up and fluffed the pillow behind her back.

"This is a strange sort of dream," she said. "Aren't you going to do something?"

The dragon leaped straight up into the air, turned a somersault just below the ceiling, and landed on his nose, bouncing off the blankets onto the floor, then sprang back up onto the bed and spread his arms wide. Annie laughed and clapped her hands. The dragon opened his mouth wide to show needle-sharp teeth, bowed, and sat down again as if nothing had happened.

"That was great," she said. "Can you breathe fire?"

He lifted a leathery hand and rasped his claws together. A small flame darted up from one of his claw-tips, burning blue and yellow and flickering in the puffs of wind. The dragon winked at her and blew on the flame. She expected a gout of fire, but instead the little blaze winked out.

"Sorry," the dragon said in a surprisingly soft voice, "I can breathe or I can be on fire, but not both."

"Who are you?" Annie said.

"Fidget," the dragon said.

"Why do they call you Fidget?"

"I don't know," he said as he gently scratched his belly with one foot.

"And who are you?" Annie asked the fairy.

"My name is Jazzberry," she said, in a voice that was high and tinkly, like a little girl's laugh. She twirled in a mid-air pirouette, spinning faster and faster until her skirt stuck straight out, stopping so abruptly that Annie's eyes hurt. She bowed.

Annie bowed back. "Nice to meet you. I'm Annie."

"We know," Fidget said.

"How do you know?"

"We know a lot," Jazzberry said. She settled onto Annie's knee and sat down, crossing her legs. Her wings shivered softly.

"Where do you come from?"

"That's a mystery, isn't it?" the fairy said.

"Yes," Fidget said. "Where does anyone come from?"

"Well, I'm from Leftover."

“Where’s that?”

“Right here, silly. Leftover, Illinois.”

“You call this place Leftover?” the fairy said.

“You said you knew a lot,” Annie said, “but you don’t even know the name of our town?”

“We don’t spend much time in towns,” Fidget explained, rubbing his forehead with the thin tip of his tail.

“Well, where do you live?”

“We live in the Haunted Woods,” the dragon said.

“The woods are why we’re here,” Jazzberry said. “We need your help. Will you come visit us?”

“In the Haunted Woods? When?”

“Tomorrow after school.”

Annie thought this was the strangest dream she’d ever had. But she didn’t have anything planned after school tomorrow, and she had never been afraid of the Haunted Woods. Some kids said that monsters lived there, or ghosts, but Annie didn’t believe in those things. She said she would come.

Fidget opened his mouth wide again, showing her his teeth and his long, black tongue. That must be how he smiles, Annie thought.

“Annie,” Jazzberry said, “you’re dreaming, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Will you promise to keep this dream a secret? Don’t tell anyone about us.”

“Why not?”

“It’s dream magic,” Jazzberry said.

“I love magic,” Fidget said, and he pulled a mouse out of his ear.

“How did you do that?” Annie said.

“Fidget!” the fairy scolded. “I’m trying to talk to Annie.”

“Sorry,” the dragon said. He put the mouse back in his ear.

“How does he do that?”

“It’s not magic, that’s just his pet mouse. He keeps it in his ear.”

“I don’t have pockets,” Fidget explained. It was true: he wasn’t wearing any clothes at all.

“Annie, will you promise?” Jazzberry said. “Promise not to tell anyone about this dream, and come to the Haunted Woods tomorrow after school.”

Annie liked them both, and she liked this dream a lot, so she promised.

Jazzberry fluttered off Annie’s knee and hovered in the air above the bed. “Time to go, Fidget,” she said.

The dragon jumped into the air and unfolded his wings. They looked like bat’s wings, and they were wider than he was long. He beat them twice, folded them again, and dove out the window.

“See you tomorrow,” Jazzberry said. She floated out after Fidget.

Annie smiled. She lay down again and dreamed that she went back to sleep.

\* \* \*

When she went downstairs for breakfast the next morning, her parents were sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and sharing the newspaper.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” her father said. He ruffled her hair as she walked by him to get her cereal. She stopped for a moment to straighten her scrunchy.

“Raymond, do you always have to muss her hair?” her mother said.

“Children need traditions and rituals,” her father said happily. “I’ve been mussing her hair every morning since she could walk. Right, Annie?”

“Right, Dad,” Annie said automatically.

She poured a bowl of cornflakes and sliced up a banana on top with a table knife. The milk was already on the table. She reached for the sugar shaker.

“Not too much,” her mother warned her.

“Not too little, either,” Annie said.

Her mother frowned at her, but not seriously, and poured her a glass of juice.

“I had the—” Oops. Annie had almost told them about her dream, but just in time she remembered her promise to Jazzberry.

“You had what, dear?” her mother said.

Why shouldn’t she tell them? It was just a dream. Did a dream promise even count?

Maybe it did. Maybe it counted even more than a daytime promise.

“I had a hard time with my homework last night,” Annie said instead.

“Geography again?” her father said.

Annie nodded with her mouth full of corn flakes. She liked the way they crunched before they got soggy.

“Maybe we need to get her a better globe,” her mother said.

“No, we just need to travel more,” her father said.

“We don’t travel at all.”

“That’s my point.”

“I wish we could. But we can never seem to coordinate our vacations with Annie’s school term.”

Her parents both worked in St. Louis, about twenty miles away. Her mother was a software engineer and her father was a civil engineer. Annie found it easier to understand her mother’s job; her father always talked about weight loads and stress fractures, while her mother talked about bugs. She understood bugs pretty well, especially dragonflies, which were her favorite.

They waited with her on the porch for the school bus. The sun was out, but the spring air was still a little cool. Annie looked back as the bus pulled away and saw her parents walking back into the house with their arms around each other.

School was bad, as usual. She liked English—her teacher, Mrs. Longsnout, was reading them Sherlock Holmes, even though they were only in the third grade—and she loved math class, but all the rest were so boring she could barely stay awake. Mrs. Longsnout called on her in geography again, even though she knew Annie didn’t know the answer, and everyone laughed when she said the Himalayas were in Montana with the rest of the mountains.

When the long day ended, the bus let her off in front of her house, and Annie unlocked the front door and went in. She always got home before her parents did.

She remembered her promise to come to the Haunted Woods after school. That might be fun, even if nothing happened. Annie ran up to her room and changed into jeans. After locking the front door again, she got her bike out of the garage and rolled down the driveway.

Otto was lurking at the corner, riding his bike in circles in the middle of the intersection. He was seven, a year younger than Annie, but she liked him, even if his face was almost solid freckles.

“Where you going?” he called out as she approached.

“Nowhere.”

“Can I come?”

“You want to follow me to nowhere?” Annie said.

“Uh...”

“I’m just going for a ride.”

“I’ll come with you,” Otto said.

He snapped out of his turn and fell in behind her. Since they were friends, she couldn’t think of how to stop him. It didn’t matter, anyway. She wasn’t going to find anything in the Haunted Woods except trees and bugs.

They rode a mile out of town onto a country road. Straight ahead was a hill that bumped up out of the ground as if someone had hit the earth’s head with a hammer. It was covered in trees.

“You’re not going to the Haunted Woods, are you?” Otto said.

“Sure, why not?”

“Because it’s haunted.”

“Don’t be silly, there’s just a lot of owls in there. People think they’re ghosts, but the only reason to be afraid is if you’re a field mouse.”

“I’m no mouse,” Otto said bravely.

“Me neither,” Annie said, and she pedaled faster.

At the base of the hill the road turned to gravel and a big sign stood in a field. It said, “Coming Soon Enchanted Woods A Modern Subdivision.” Annie had seen this sign so often she barely noticed it.

They rode on the gravel for a while but it was scary the way rocks shot out from under the tires. Annie stopped and got off her bike.

“What are you doing?” Otto said.

“I want to walk up there,” Annie said, pointing to a footpath that led uphill into the woods.

“Why?”

“I just want to.”

Otto was not enthusiastic about this idea, but he set his kickstand, stood his bike next to hers, and followed her.

The path was narrow and sometimes hard to see. It was overgrown on both sides with leafy shrubs, some of which were taller than Annie. Almost all of them were taller than Otto. But after a few minutes the trees got bigger and thicker and there was hardly any underbrush at all, and the path was much easier to follow. It was very shady under the tall trees. Annie saw some deer tracks on the trail and pointed them out to Otto, who got excited that they might actually see a deer up close.

“Maybe it will let me pet it,” he said.

“It’s not a petting zoo,” Annie said. “Deer are wild animals.”

“I know that.”

“It might bite you.”

“Deer don’t bite people,” Otto said.

“Are you sure?”

Otto didn’t look sure. He began looking back as they walked, as if afraid that a deer might sneak up behind him and bite his rear end.

They hadn't seen or heard any owls, but Annie supposed it was too early. She thought they mostly hooted at night. When they had been walking under the trees for about fifteen minutes, Otto started lagging behind.

"What's the matter?" Annie said.

"Maybe we should go back," he said. "I don't want to get lost."

"How can you get lost? There's only one trail, and you're standing on it." It was impossible to get confused about what direction you were going: downhill was home.

"It's getting dark."

Annie looked up. The sun was flickering through the leaves high overhead. It wouldn't set for another couple of hours. She was about to say something rude about mice when a loud shriek filled the air. Otto jumped and whirled around to look behind him.

"Maybe it's the deer," Annie said jokingly.

Another shriek made them both jump. It sounded a lot like the peacocks at the zoo.

"That sounds just like—" she began, but stopped when she realized that Otto was running at full speed down the hill, back to the bikes. "A peacock."

"Thank you," a voice said, right beside her ear.

She turned, but no one was there. She turned all around, but saw no one. Then, out of the corner of her eyes, she saw something flash out of a tree, and she turned again, thinking she would see an owl at last. But it was a dragon, about the size of a poodle but with a long, thin tail and wide, outspread wings, swooping down to land at her feet. It sprang up into the air so they were nose to nose, fell back, and did it again. The third time, it said, "Hello, Annie."

"You're real?" she said in wonder.

She felt something land on her shoulder and jerked her head to see Jazzberry the fairy sitting there, smiling and kicking her legs like a kid on a dock.

"You're real?" Annie said.

Jazzberry just smiled, and Fidget bounced so high up into the air that he needed his wings to land.

## Chapter 2: The Haunted Woods

Two thousand and two questions fought to escape from Annie's mouth. For a moment, in confusion, she couldn't speak at all. Her legs felt weak, so she sat down on the leafy ground, leaving Jazzberry sitting in mid-air, hovering with slow strokes of her iridescent wings.

Despite the shade, Annie noticed things that she hadn't been able to see by moonlight. Jazzberry's hair was not just spiky, it was deep violet, but it was not as knotted as she'd thought. It seemed to be waving, but when she watched it closely, it didn't move.

Fidget's scaly skin was green with black spots, and stray beams of sunlight made it glisten as if it were wet. He had a tiny crest running down the center of his back to his tail, which was almost as long as his head and body together. In the daylight his wings didn't look so creepy.

Annie finally got her brain in order. "Will you come and live with me?"

The fairy laughed. "What would your parents say?" she said.

"They'd let me keep you. They wanted to give me a little brother, but mommy says her job won't let her. You could be my little sister and brother."

Jazzberry settled to the ground and sat down in front of Annie. Fidget stopped bouncing on one leg and sat beside the fairy.

"Thank you for asking," Jazzberry said, "but we can't."

"Why not?"

"We're not allowed to live with little girls. We're not even allowed to talk to them."

"Why not?"

"Rules," Fidget said glumly.

"But you're talking to me."

"Yes, we're breaking the rules right now."

"We're going to get in big trouble," Fidget moaned.

"So why? Why are you talking to me?"

"Should we tell her?" Jazzberry asked Fidget.

The dragon looked up at Annie for a moment, then started pulling on his ear. "Not yet," he said.

"Tell me what?" Annie said.

"We can't tell you what we can't tell you," Fidget said. "Not yet."

Annie pouted until another question bubbled up out of her brain and burst out of her mouth. "The Haunted Woods really *are* haunted, aren't they? By *you*."

"Yes," Jazzberry said.

"I never scared anybody before," Fidget said. "It was fun."

"Are there more fairies and dragons?" Annie said.

"There are more of us," Jazzberry said. "Not all of us live in the Haunted Woods, though."

"I thought fairies only lived in England," Annie said.

"I would never live in England," Fidget said. "I don't like fish and chips."

"You've never eaten fish and chips," Jazzberry said.

"I've never eaten mud, either, but I know I don't want to."

"How long have you lived here?" Annie said.

"All our lives," Fidget said proudly.

“Well then, why haven’t I ever seen you before? I come here all the time.”

They vanished so suddenly that Annie blinked and shook her head, thinking that her eyes were tricking her. A single leaf fluttered to the ground. They were really gone.

“Come back!” she cried.

Jazzberry floated down from a branch in the big oak tree above her. Fidget poked his nose around the trunk and scampered back to sit at her feet.

“No one sees us unless we want them to,” Jazzberry said.

“Is it magic?” Annie said.

“I love magic,” Fidget said. He flicked a hand and a deck of cards appeared in it. He fanned them out. “Pick a card.”

“Not now, Fidget,” Jazzberry said.

Fidget shrugged and made the cards disappear.

“It’s not magic,” the fairy said. She landed on the tip of Annie’s sneaker. “There’s no such thing as magic—”

“Yes there is,” Fidget said. “Want to see me make an elephant disappear?”

“Those are magic *tricks*,” Jazzberry said. “Not real magic.”

“What do you mean, there’s no magic?” Annie said. “You’re a fairy. You’re a dragon. *You’re magic.*”

“No, Annie, we’re not. We’re real people, just like you, and we have to live by the laws of nature, just as humans do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Fidget?” Jazzberry said.

“Not yet,” the dragon said, shaking his head so hard that his ears flopped around.

Annie was getting frustrated. “Will you show me your fairy ring?”

Fidget leaned over to peer at Jazzberry’s hands. “She’s not wearing any jewelry,” he said.

“Fidget,” Jazzberry said, “shut up.” She flew up so she was floating in front of Annie’s face. “I can’t explain everything right now,” she said. “But we want you to come see us again, and eventually we will tell you everything. I promise.”

“When?” Annie said. “When can I see you again?”

“Tomorrow. After school.”

Tomorrow was Friday. She wouldn’t have as much time because her parents always came home a little early on Friday, but she said she would come.

“One more question,” she said. “Do you know any werewolves?”

“There are no werewolves,” Jazzberry said. “No witches, no vampires, no walking mummies, no bigfoot or abominable snowmen, no leprechauns or trolls or elves. Only fairies and dragons and very gullible humans.”

“Except for the Christmas elves,” Annie said.

“Of course,” Fidget said. “She wasn’t talking about Santa Claus and his elves.” He looked at Jazzberry fiercely. “Were you?”

“Of course not,” Jazzberry sighed.

“I have an idea,” Fidget said. “Let’s play hide and seek.”

They had an advantage because they could fly, but Annie got them to promise that they wouldn’t fly higher than her head. Even so, she only found Fidget once, and Jazzberry not at all, but they found her every time, even when she climbed up into the crotch of a big oak tree and huddled down in the mossy hollow there.

“You’re very good at this,” she told Fidget.

“Thanks. I’ve had years of practice.”

“Really? How old are you?”

“I’ll be three hundred and six next month.”

Annie gaped in surprise. She’d thought Fidget was a kid like her. “Three hundred?”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Jazzberry said. “He’s just a kid.”

“Well, how old do dragons get?” Annie said.

“Five thousand or so,” Fidget said proudly.

“How old are you?” Annie asked the fairy.

“I’m twenty.”

“But fairies only live to three hundred,” Fidget said. “I’m already older than the oldest fairy who ever was.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not just a kid,” Jazzberry said. “A spoiled, scaly, snotty, undisciplined kid.”

“But strong,” Fidget said happily, spreading his wings and flexing his arm muscles.

“You like math, Annie,” Jazzberry said. “Work out the arithmetic. You’re older than either one of us.”

Annie sat down on the soft ground under a big hickory tree. “I don’t understand. You’re twenty and he’s three hundred and six. I’m only eight.”

“You’ll probably live to be ninety,” she said. “What percent of your life have you lived so far?”

Annie picked up a twig and scratched in the dirt. “About nine percent.”

“And what percent have we lived?”

It took her a minute to work it out. “You’re seven, Fidget’s six.”

“So you’re older than we are. You’ve lived more of your life, you’ve learned more of what you will eventually know than either of us.”

She had never thought of things that way before. That meant that a one-year old puppy was about the same percent age as Fidget. No wonder he seemed so much like Aunt Helen’s poodle.

“It’s starting to get dark,” Fidget said. “You’d better go home.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Your parents will worry about you,” Jazzberry said. “Come back tomorrow. We’ll be here.”

Annie reluctantly got up and said goodbye. By the time she got to the edge of the Haunted Woods, it was almost too dark to see the path. The sky was purple when she ran into her house. Her parents were already home.

“Where were you?” her mother said. “We were starting to get worried.”

“I was riding my bike,” Annie said.

Her mother brushed leaves off the back of her shirt. “And playing in the woods?”

“Uh huh. What’s for dinner?”

Her mother shook her head and turned back to the sink.

All through the lasagna and salad, then during the peach ice cream, Annie was bursting to tell her parents about her new friends. But she knew they wouldn’t believe her, and she had promised not to tell.

She went to bed impatient for tomorrow to come, wishing it could be Friday afternoon so she could go back to the Haunted Woods. It wasn’t until breakfast the next morning that she realized she had completely forgotten to do her homework.

\* \* \*

“Annie, can you tell us what body of water the Nile River empties into?”

Annie looked up from the picture she was making of Jazzberry. She was having trouble drawing the wings. Jazzberry’s wings were almost like a butterfly’s, but no matter how Annie drew them they looked like cucumbers.

Mrs. Longsnout was smiling at her pleasantly, waiting. June Newman, her friend that sat right in front of her, turned around and mouthed something that looked like “Betty Geranium.” Several of the other kids started to snicker.

“The Nile River?” Annie said. “That’s in Africa. So...” She thought furiously. Africa was the one that looked like the head of a horse that was eating oats. She wondered what dragons ate. Maybe bugs. Maybe she should take some food with her when she went to the Haunted Woods this afternoon.

“Annie?” her teacher said.

She remembered that Egypt was in Africa. Moses had parted the Dead Sea when he led his people on that long hike out of Egypt.

“The Dead Sea?” she said.

Half the kids laughed out loud. The other half looked embarrassed and some of her friends dropped their heads to their arms.

“I believe you’re thinking of the Red Sea, dear,” Mrs. Longsnout said. “Who can show us where the Dead Sea is?”

Hands flailed in the air. She picked know-it-all Jerry Hacking, who strutted up to the world map at the front of the room and pointed at a small blue patch. Annie had no idea where it was he was pointing.

“The Dead Sea is on the eastern edge of Israel,” Jerry said. “The *Red* Sea lies between Africa and the Arabian peninsula. And the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea.” He smirked and sat down again.

Annie looked at the clock in despair. It was only eleven thirty.

\* \* \*

What would fairies eat? Annie settled on Twinkies: if Jazzberry didn’t like them, Annie could eat them. But what about dragons? She decided Fidget would probably like cheese. She found a shrink-wrapped ball of mozzarella in the refrigerator.

The phone rang as she was about to run out the door. It might be her parents, so she had to answer it.

“Hello?” she said.

“Annie, you have *got* to study harder,” June said.

“Who cares about the Nile River?”

“You mean the Nile. Look, my mom just went out shopping. I’ll come over and help you study.”

“On Friday afternoon?” Annie said. “Are you crazy? Studying’s for Sunday night.”

“I’ll come over anyway.”

“I can’t, June. I have to go.”

“Go where?” she said, but Annie hung up and ran out to her bike.

Otto was riding circles outside his house again, but when he saw Annie coming toward him he jumped off his bike and ran inside. The front tire was still revolving slowly as she went past.

She left her bike at the edge of the woods and put on her backpack. The food and her camera were inside. She had only taken a few steps into the trees when Fidget fell off a branch and plopped onto the leafy path.

“Good afternoon,” he said with his head tilted back almost vertical so he could look up at her. He rubbed his throat with the tip of his tail. It sounded like someone using sandpaper on rough metal.

“Where’s Jazzberry?”

“Right here,” the fairy said from her shoulder. She had landed so softly that Annie hadn’t felt it. “We’ve been watching you,” Jazzberry said.

“What?”

“We’ve been watching you for several days.”

“Why?”

“To see if we can trust you,” Fidget said.

“Trust me with what?”

“We’re not supposed to reveal ourselves to humans,” Jazzberry said.

“We’re going to get in big trouble,” Fidget agreed.

“But we need you. We have a big problem, and you’re the only person in the world who can help us.”

“Why?”

“Fidget?” the fairy said.

The dragon unfurled his wings and shot into the sky. He zoomed back down a minute later and landed right in front of Annie.

“All clear,” he said.

“Let’s walk to the sign,” Jazzberry said.

“What sign?” Annie said.

They didn’t answer, but Fidget led her out into the sunshine. It was a pretty day in the middle of May, not too warm, with only a few clouds in the sky. Bugs flew around her head and she noticed that Fidget ignored them: he was busy trying to walk and scratch his back with one wing tip at the same time. So he probably didn’t eat bugs.

“I brought you a snack,” she said.

Fidget stopped instantly. “Snack?”

Annie took off her pack and held out the mozzarella ball. Fidget took it with a clawed hand, sniffed it once delicately, and popped the whole thing in his mouth without unwrapping it.

“You’re not supposed to eat the plastic!” she said.

“Really?” he mumbled around the cheese. “Sorry.”

His jaws worked for a moment, as if he were trying to get something unstuck from a back tooth. Then he opened his mouth and spit out the plastic wrapper—still intact, completely clean, and empty of cheese.

“How did you do that?” Annie said.

“He has a prehensile soft palate,” Jazzberry said.

“What?”

“Never mind. Fidget, let’s go.”

“I brought you a snack, too,” Annie said.

“Thank you. I’ll eat it later, if you don’t mind.”

Annie put her pack back on and followed the little dragon, who scampered from one side of the path to the other like a puppy, sniffing flowers and poking his snout under bushes. Annie's feet crunched on the gravel road. Fidget stopped when they reached the big sign in the field.

"We've been watching you, even before we came to visit you that night," Jazzberry said. "We needed to be sure you wouldn't tell anyone about us. We needed to know if you're a good person."

"And you are," Fidget said. "But you're not very good at geography or history. And you're a little rude to your friends."

"I am not."

"Let's not argue," Jazzberry said. "You had chances to tell your parents and your friends about us, but you kept your promise, even though you thought it was just a dream promise. Now I'm sure. Do you see that sign?"

Annie really looked at the sign for the first time in a year. "Coming Soon Enchanted Woods A Modern Subdivision." There was a diagram at the bottom with thin wedges like slices of pie radiating away from an open circle at the middle. Every wedge had a number. At the bottom of the sign was small print that she couldn't make any sense of.

"What does it mean?" she said.

"Your Uncle Dennis is going to build some houses here." Jazzberry said.

"He is?" All the times she'd passed this sign she'd had no idea. She looked closer. "It doesn't say Uncle Dennis."

"No," Fidget said. "It says, 'Enchanted Woods Development Group.' That's your uncle."

"It is?"

"Yes, it is," Jazzberry said. "Do you know what a Modern Subdivision is?"

"Houses?" she guessed.

"Right," Fidget said. "Lots of houses."

"Forty of them in the first phase," Jazzberry said. "With three or four phases after. How many more houses is that?"

Annie multiplied in her head. "A hundred twenty or a hundred sixty."

"Very good. Do you know where he's going to build the houses?"

Annie looked around. It would be easy to build houses on the flat part where they were standing. "Here?"

"No, Annie." Jazzberry lifted off her shoulder and hovered in the air, pointing at the Haunted Woods. "He's going to cut down the woods and build the houses on the hill."

"Why?"

"For the view," Fidget said sadly.

"And when they cut down our woods," Jazzberry said, "all of us will die."

### Chapter 3: Dilemma

The bad news didn't sink in right away. Annie waited for Jazzberry to say that she was joking, or that she hadn't meant *die*. But Jazzberry looked perfectly serious, and Fidget was as somber as someone can be when he has two fingers jiggling in his ear.

"I don't understand," Annie said.

"It's very complicated," the fairy said. "But the result is simple. If they cut down these woods, all the fairies and all the dragons, everywhere in this world, will die."

"No!" Annie shouted.

"I'm sorry, it's true. But you can stop it."

"How? What can I do?"

"You can convince your uncle not to build those houses."

Annie looked at the big, official sign. She hadn't even known that Uncle Dennis built houses. She thought he was a computer salesman. Her mother had bought her computer from him. How could she possibly convince him not to kill the fairies?

"How can I do that?"

"I don't know," Jazzberry said. "If we knew how to stop him, we'd have done it ourselves. We need you to think of a way."

Annie felt just like she did before a big test that she hadn't studied for. She'd just met Jazzberry and Fidget; now they were going to die because she couldn't even imagine the hint of a clue how she might be able to talk Uncle Dennis into giving up his houses.

"You don't need to figure it out right now," Fidget said.

"What?"

"We have some time. They're not going to start digging until June."

A month. She had only one month to save them. She felt like crying.

"Why don't you just move?" she asked. "Can't you find another woods to live in?"

"It's not that simple," Jazzberry said. "Even those who don't live in the woods are in danger. Our—"

"Careful," Fidget said.

"I know, Fidget."

"What?" Annie said.

"I'm sorry?" Jazzberry said.

"What are you hiding?"

"I can't tell you everything, Annie. You wouldn't understand it. Sometimes *I* don't understand it. I'm just a kid, too, you know."

"You were going to explain why we can't move," Fidget said. He was sitting up with his hips tucked under and his tail standing straight up in the air in front of him, rubbing his rear end on the ground.

"This place is special to us," the fairy said. "We've been here for a long time. We..." She paused. "We grow our food here. It's special food, and it won't grow anywhere else. If they cut down the woods, we won't be able to grow it anymore, and all of us will starve."

"But Fidget can eat cheese. Why do you need special food?"

"It's like vitamins," Fidget said. Now he was using his wings to wipe the dust off his rump. "Cheese is nice, but we need our vitamins, too."

“My mom has a lot of vitamins—a whole drawer full. I can get you all the vitamins you need.”

“Those are human vitamins,” Jazzberry said. “We need fairy vitamins and dragon vitamins. No one knows how to grow them but us.”

Annie stomped her foot and couldn’t hold the tears back any longer. “Why? It’s not fair. I don’t know how to help you. How can I stop Uncle Dennis? Why can’t you just come live with me?”

Jazzberry flew up to of Annie’s face and wiped away a tear. The teardrop completely engulfed her tiny hand, like a shimmery catcher’s mitt.

“Annie, we would love to live with you. But we’d have to leave our parents behind, and that would make them very sad. And without our vitamins, we’d die.”

“We have to stop the houses,” Fidget said.

“*You* have to stop them,” Jazzberry said.

\* \* \*

Annie got home about five minutes before her parents did. She just had time to wash her face and flop onto the couch with a comic book before the front door flew open and her father strode in hollering, “Weekend!”

Her mother ordered a pizza and, while they were waiting for it to be delivered, she decided to torture her daughter. She sat down beside Annie and said, “How was school today?”

“Mom!”

“What? What did I say? Should I not care about your life?”

“School isn’t my life, Mom. School is punishment for something I did in a *previous* life.”

“My God, Laura,” her father said as he dropped into his favorite chair, “our daughter’s become a Buddhist.”

“Do you really think of school as punishment?” her mother said.

“My teacher called on me in geography again. Why does she do that? She knows I don’t know the answer.”

“I think she hopes that this time you studied. She’s probably waiting patiently for the day when Annie Rust will know her lessons, and her life’s work is complete.”

“Then the old marmot can retire,” her father said.

“Raymond!” her mother said.

“Sorry. That was rude. Forget I said that,” he said to Annie. “Everyone knows Mrs. Longsnout’s not a marmot.” He waited until her mother turned away before saying, “She’s a badger.”

Without looking, her mother picked up a throw pillow off the couch and flung it directly into her father’s face.

“Score,” he said in a muffled voice.

All during her ride home, and all during dinner, Annie had been trying to think of how to help Jazzberry. As she and her father were negotiating who would eat the last slice of pepperoni and mushroom, she suddenly realized that she needed something to work with. She needed information.

“Mom,” she said as she was helping to carry the plates into the kitchen, “how is Aunt Helen’s poodle doing?”

It was still a puppy and Aunt Helen had been having trouble teaching it not to attack the UPS man, who was a huge, red-headed, bearded bear of a man—who was afraid of dogs.

“It bit a Jehovah’s Witness the other day.”

“God be praised,” her father said.

“Raymond!”

“Sorry.”

“Why do you ask, dear?”

“I haven’t seen it for a while. It’s going to be all grown up before you know it.”

“Maybe we should stop by this weekend and visit,” her mother said. She looked over at Annie’s father.

“Good idea,” he said, picking up the phone.

Annie turned away to put the glasses in the dishwasher in order to hide her smile.

\* \* \*

Uncle Dennis’s house was much bigger than Annie’s house, even though they had no children. Aunt Helen had a poodle and a cockatoo, four bathrooms, and a lot of furniture.

Annie stood by the cockatoo’s cage, which was taller than she was, reaching between the bars to scratch the bird behind its upright, white crest. It had closed its eyes and drooped its head so she could reach the back of its neck easily, and it turned its beak back and forth slowly as if it were keeping time to a slow song. Her father and Uncle Dennis were arguing, as far as she could tell, about whether a certain baseball umpire’s mother was a hyena or a goose.

Aunt Helen came into the living room carrying her puppy. “Would you like to pet Mr. Snowball?” her aunt said.

Since Annie had said she wanted to see the dog, she had to do it, even though she really didn’t like the puppy very much. She ruffled its head, and when she pulled her hand back it tried to bite her.

“Bad Mr. Snowball,” Aunt Helen crooned happily. “Don’t you bite my pretty niece.”

Annie wondered how many people the dog would kill before Aunt Helen realized that he was not, in fact, a good puppy.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Aunt Helen said. “Annie, would you help your mother finish setting the table?”

“Sure,” Annie said. She gave the cockatoo one more rub and left her father and his brother arguing over what *kind* of goose the umpire’s mother was.

Dinner was always strange at Uncle Dennis and Aunt Helen’s house. The adults always seemed to have trouble thinking of things to talk about, and the food was just weird. Tonight they were having white blobs that might be tofu mixed with noodles, evil-looking mushrooms, strips of vegetables, and a sauce that smelled like oranges that had caught on fire.

Annie’s parents praised the food, but she could tell by the way they ate slowly that they didn’t like it much. She carefully ate the noodles out of the nasty pile and left the rest.

When the conversation ran out, she looked up and said, “Uncle Dennis, one of my friends told me that you’re going to build houses in the Haunted Woods. I thought you just sold computers.”

The adults stared at her for a long moment as though she’d suddenly grown a tail.

“Yes, that’s right,” her uncle said. “I mean, my partner and I bought the land several— How did you say you heard about this?”

“My friend and I were riding out by the Haunted Woods and she showed me the sign and said, ‘That’s your Uncle Dennis.’ I said, ‘No, it says Enchanted Woods Development Group,’ but she said it was you.”

“That’s the name of our company.”

“But why do you want to cut down the Haunted Woods?”

“To make money, of course,” her father said.

“Thanks, Ray,” Uncle Dennis said.

“Are you still pretending that your ‘Modern Subdivision’ is a gift to mankind? It’s just a development.”

“No, it’s not, vapor brain,” her uncle said. “It’s a self-contained twenty-first century reinterpretation of the classic American village. You just can’t stand—”

“Dennis,” Aunt Helen said.

Uncle Dennis leaned back in his chair and grinned sadly. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t you like the woods?” Annie said after a moment.

“Of course I do, sweetie, but…” He shrugged. “They’re not doing anybody any good the way they are. Wouldn’t it be better to have a nice village up on the hill, with big houses and pretty lawns and trees?”

“But we already have trees, lots of trees. Big ones.”

“Yes, I know, but we can build two hundred houses there, very nice houses with a great view.”

“Nice, big, expensive houses,” her father said.

“Shut up, Raymond,” Annie’s mother said. “You two have been arguing about this for years. Let it go. It’s his land, he has the right to do what he wants with it.”

“It’s not his land,” her father said. “First of all, it should never have been put up for sale. It should have been turned into a park or tacked onto Shawnee National Forest. And second, he doesn’t *own* it. The bank owns it.”

“Blah blah,” her uncle said. “The city didn’t want to spend the money to turn it into a park. Shawnee National Forest is way south of here, and it’s too small to be its own forest—it’s only a hill.”

Annie cut off her father, who was about to say something back. “But we like the hill the way it is.”

“Who does?” her uncle said.

“We do. The kids. We play there all the time.”

“I thought all you kids were afraid of the place. Isn’t that why they call it the Haunted Woods?”

“Dennis,” her father said, “you and I played there every summer’s day until we were sixteen.”

“I remember that you dragged me there every summer’s day.”

“What, were you scared?”

Uncle Dennis paused a moment, looking at Annie. “Sure, I was scared. I was just a kid.”

“I’m not scared,” Annie said. “I love the Haunted Woods.”

“Enjoy it while you can, Annie,” her father said. “As soon as the construction loan goes through, my little brother’s going to mow it down and turn it into a suburb.”

\* \* \*

Annie’s friend June came over the next day, Sunday, so they could study together. Annie had spent the morning in her room, trying to remember everything the adults had said and writing it down.

Uncle Dennis had a partner. A bank owned the land. They were waiting for a construction loan. Her father thought it was a bad idea to cut down the Haunted Woods. It was too small to be a National Forest. Uncle Dennis was scared of the woods.

She had no idea what all of that added up to, but somehow she had to find a way to use what she had learned to stop her uncle. If she didn't, all of the fairies, everywhere, would die. And the dragons, too.

It was very hard to concentrate on Africa. June and Annie lay on their stomachs on Annie's bed, looking at a map of Egypt, but Annie couldn't stop thinking about the Haunted Woods.

"How would you find out who owned some land?" Annie asked June.

"In Cairo?"

"No, here in Leftover."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's some land I'm interested in," Annie said. "I want to know who owns it."

June frowned at her. "Annie, are you crazy?"

Annie bugged out her eyes and made a face. June laughed.

"No, I'm not nuts," Annie said. "This is serious."

"So is Mrs. Longsnout. She's going to flunk you if you don't learn this."

"I have something more important than Egypt to think about."

"Are your parents getting a divorce?"

"No!" Annie said. "What are you talking about?"

"It seems like they argue a lot. And your dad's weird."

"You're right, he is weird. But that has nothing to do with this."

"With what?" June said.

Annie had been propping her head up on her hands, but now she let it drop onto the bed and hid under her loose, blonde hair. How could she do this alone? She had no idea what the questions were, never mind the answers. She felt tears running down her cheeks.

"Tell me what's wrong," June said. "I can help."

It was time to do something. Annie made a decision. She lifted her head, sat up, and wiped the tears off her face.

"Will you go somewhere with me?" she said.

"Annie, we have to study."

"This is more important. It's really important. Will you go?"

"Where?"

"To the Haunted Woods," Annie said. "There's someone I want you to meet."

## Chapter 4: Boys, Large and Small

They dropped their bikes at the foot of the hill.

“This is really secret,” Annie said. “No one else knows this but me. So you have to swear your most sacred swear that you won’t tell anyone what I’m going to show you.”

“What are you talking about?” June said.

“You have to swear.”

“Okay, okay, I swear on my mother’s hair that I won’t tell anybody. Geez!”

“You promise?”

“I just promised, Annie. Can we hurry up? We still have a lot of studying to do.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

The woods were cool and shady. Annie led June up the trail, past the point where she’d first seen the fairy and dragon. She was about to yell out when she heard the peacock call.

“Are there peacocks up here?” June said with interest. “I’ve never seen one outside a zoo.”

The peacock stopped abruptly and they heard what sounded a lot like a lion. June looked around, suddenly worried, and took a step backwards. The lion roared again, louder and closer this time, and they heard it panting.

“What’s going on?” June said. She was flat-out scared now.

“Fidget,” Annie said, “cut it out. This is my friend June. She’s going to help us.”

The panting noises stopped and nothing happened for a long time.

“What is it?” June said. “Who’s there?”

“Wait,” Annie said.

“Annie,” Jazzberry said from just behind her ear, “what are you doing?”

Fidget tumbled out of a tree and zoomed down to land at June’s feet, grinning his ferocious smile. June whirled away from him and came face to tiny face with the fairy.

“Who are you?” Jazzberry said.

As June crumpled to the ground in a faint, Fidget scampered out of the way to avoid being flattened.

\* \* \*

“Annie, you promised us,” Jazzberry said.

“I can’t do it by myself,” Annie said. “I don’t even understand half of what Uncle Dennis is talking about. If we don’t get help, we’ll fail.”

“Now our turkey’s cooked,” Fidget said sadly, rubbing his nose with the tip of his tail.

The fairy hovered over June’s face. “Can we trust this person not to tell everyone about us?”

“She’s my best friend, and she’s really smart. You can trust her.”

June opened her eyes and sat up. “I had the strangest—” Her voice broke off when she saw Fidget balancing on his tail, rubbing his stomach with all four paws.

Annie and her friends explained everything to June. It took a long time. When she asked why they couldn’t just move to some other woods, June seemed even less satisfied than Annie with Jazzberry’s explanation. But in the end she accepted what they told her and promised to keep the secret.

“Come on, Annie,” she said at last.

“Where are we going?”

“To my house. We have to talk to my brother.” Annie, Jazzberry, and Fidget all started shouting at her. “I’m not going to tell him,” June said when she got them to quiet down. “He can help us without knowing why.”

\* \* \*

“Hey, October,” June’s brother Max said when they knocked on his bedroom door. “Hey, Annie.”

He was lying on his bed, surrounded by open books, yellow pads, and spiral-bound notebooks. Max was a lot older than June—he went to college in St. Louis.

“Why does he always call you October?” Annie whispered.

“Because of my name,” June replied with some irritation, not bothering to whisper. “I was conceived in June, so my parents called me June. Max thinks it would’ve been funny if I’d been conceived in October, like he was.”

“What are you squirts up to?” Max said.

“We want to find something out for a school project,” June said, “but we can’t figure out how to start.”

“Great!” Max said. “Research is my specialty.”

Max was too tall for his bed: his ankles and feet hung over the end. He had long, tousled brown hair the same color as June’s, and a thin face with tiny oval eyeglasses perched on his nose.

“Max is a journalism major,” June told Annie. “That’s like newspapers and TV. It’s his job to find things out.”

“I’m pretty good at it, too,” Max said. “What do you need?”

“You know the Haunted Woods?” Annie said.

“Sure. I used to smoke— uh, I used to hang out there with my buddies in high school.”

“You smoke?” June said.

“Nope, not any more. I quit. It’s really bad for you.”

“Anyway,” Annie said forcefully, “somebody’s going to cut down the Haunted Woods and build houses there.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“For real,” June said. “We want to find out all about it, like who it is and when they’re starting, and where did they get the money, and everything. This is the name on the sign.” She dug a slip of paper out of her jeans pocket and handed it to her brother.

“Enchanted Woods Development Group,” Max said. “You know what? I have to do a series of articles for finals. This might be a good topic.”

“You mean you’ll do it?” Annie said.

“Sure, squirt. I’ll get started on it tomorrow. I think I’ll go to the Records and Planning offices first. That should get me the names of the developers. It shouldn’t take much work to find out where the financing’s coming from. This’ll be great, like an exposé. Maybe I can even get it published. I’d hate to see them chop down the woods.”

“Thanks, Max,” June said.

“No problem, October,” he said. He smiled as he picked up his notepad and started writing.

\* \* \*

June said it would take days for Max to do his research. Annie was too excited to want to go back to studying, but June insisted, so they went back to Annie’s house. They traced the maps in

the geography book together, but none of it sank in to Annie's buzzing head. Then it was dinnertime, and June went home.

Miraculously, Mrs. Longsnout didn't call on her in class on Monday, and the rest of the day went by in a blur. Annie and June rode their bikes out to the Haunted Woods after school.

"Otto's following us," June said as they left the asphalt and headed up on the gravel road.

"I know. You can't miss him, he's weaving all over the place." Otto wasn't a very good bike rider.

"What if he follows us into the woods?"

"He won't," Annie said. She told June how Otto had been scared away by Fidget's peacock imitation. By the time they reached the sign, he was no longer visible behind them.

They told Jazzberry and Fidget how Max was going to help them by finding out everything about the houses. Fidget admitted that perhaps bringing June into the woods had been a good idea.

Annie spent the next few days, while they waited for Max to do his research, in a haze. She found it even more difficult than usual to concentrate on school. She was beginning to think she might flunk and have to do third grade again; that idea made her squirm in embarrassment and horror, but her fear just made it even harder to study.

The only thing clear to her during those days was the time she spent in the woods with her new friends. They would chase butterflies in a small meadow where two large trees had fallen to make a clearing. Jazzberry darted among the daisies, flying rings around the monarchs and swallowtails and teasing them by flying upside down beneath them.

They lay down on the damp grass and called out cloud shapes: camel and anteater, car and mushroom, pig and castle. Fidget saw the strangest things in the clouds: planetary nebula, magnesium crystal, cyclotron, hilzetter.

"What's a hilzetter?" Annie said. She hadn't understood any of the other things either, but that was a funny name.

"It's a kind of snake that can fly."

"Snakes can't fly," June said.

"Not around here, they can't."

They played hide and seek, even though Annie and June always lost. One day when Annie was climbing an oak tree—while June yelled at her to come down before she broke her neck and Fidget flew around the trunk like a traffic helicopter—she discovered that Jazzberry could scamper like a squirrel, hanging head down and clinging to the ridges in the bark with her tiny hands, and climbing faster than Annie could have fallen.

Jazzberry and Fidget asked them about their families, about school and their friends. Both Annie and June told them everything they could think of about their lives, but they were disappointed that neither Jazzberry or Fidget would tell them what it was like growing up as a fairy or a dragon. They apologized sincerely, but they wouldn't talk about themselves.

Fidget took his pet mouse, which was called Weasel, out of his ear and Annie played with him, letting the furry white fuzzball climb around on her head or sit on her shoulders while it cleaned its face with its paws. June refused to go near the mouse.

Every evening at dinnertime they sadly said goodbye and trudged down the hill back to their normal, boring lives.

\* \* \*

On Thursday she and June went to the woods after school, as they had every day that week, and again Otto followed them to the edge of the gravel road. They walked uphill under the quiet, gloomy trees. The sky was cloudy, promising rain, but not one leaf on the tall trees above them shivered in the still air.

Even Fidget seemed subdued that day. He lay on his stomach on the leafy ground with his eyes half closed, absently scratching the back of his head with the tip of his tail.

“When will Max be done?” Jazzberry said.

“Maybe tonight,” June said. “I asked him at breakfast and he said he was almost there.”

“But what’s next?” Annie said. “I know we need to know who’s working with Uncle Dennis and everything, but I still don’t see how we’re going to stop them.”

“You have to do things one step at a time,” June said. “We’ll figure that out tomorrow.”

Annie shrugged and leaned back against the tree behind her. They lapsed into silence, which was shattered suddenly by a loud, gasping cry: “Aah aah aah!”

Fidget leaped into the air with his claws extended and his mouth gaping wide. Jazzberry fluttered off Annie’s knee, and both girls scrambled to their feet.

Otto staggered out from behind a tree, his eyes bugged out, pointing at Fidget.

“Aah aah,” he cried again. His arm wavered, his knees buckled, and he ended up kneeling on the ground, still pointing at the dragon. “Dinosaur!” Otto said.

“I am *not* a dinosaur,” Fidget said.

“*Talking* dinosaur!” Otto screamed.

“I’m not a dinosaur. But my mother knew a dinosaur once.”

“Oh, Fidget,” Jazzberry said, “she did not.”

“Fairy!” Otto yelled.

“She did so. His name was Ulfenharber, and he was a dromaeosaur.”

“Velociraptor?” Otto said, suddenly intrigued.

“No, *Deinonychus antirrhopus*.”

“Fidget,” Jazzberry said, “there haven’t been any dinosaurs on this planet for millions of years, and we’ve only been here for a few thousand.”

“I didn’t say it was on this planet,” he retorted smugly.

“Otto,” Annie said, “what are you doing here?”

“Dragons and fairies,” Otto replied, as if this explained it.

“Yes, I know. What are you doing here?”

“I... I thought maybe you and June had a secret club. You come here every day after school. So I...” His voice ran out and he just stared at Fidget, who was hanging upside down from a tree branch by his tail, scratching his back by raising and lowering his body against the trunk.

“You wanted to join?” June prompted.

“Yes.”

“Well, you were right,” Annie told him. “There is a secret club, and these are our secrets. This is Jazzberry,” she pointed to the fairy, who performed a mid-air curtsy, “and Fidget.”

“Why do they call you Fidget?” Otto said.

“I don’t know,” the dragon said as he rubbed his snout with a hind foot.

“Otto,” June said, “you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“Okay.”

“No, I mean you have to swear it.”

“I swear.”

Annie stepped right in front of Otto. She was a foot taller than he was, and he seemed to shrink even more under her furious glare. "If you tell anyone about Jazzberry and Fidget," she said, "not only will I knock your head off, but they will probably die. Do you understand?"

Otto shook his head no, then nodded it yes.

"Don't tell anyone about this, don't bring anyone here, don't even talk in your sleep. Okay?"

"Okay," Otto whispered. He looked around Annie at Fidget. "Can I touch your skin?" he quavered.

\* \* \*

Max didn't finish his research that day, or the next day either. When they asked him what was taking so long, he just smiled, shrugged, and patted Annie on the head. She hated being patted on the head.

On Saturday, and every day after school the next week, Annie, June, and Otto would ride their bikes out of town, up the gravel road, and walk up the hill until Fidget jumped out at them. After a few days, Otto stopped squealing when Fidget did this, and started laughing. Fidget looked disappointed: he liked people to think he was fierce, even though he was smaller than some house cats.

One day Otto wasn't waiting for them outside his house, and though Annie and June waited for him by the trail, he never came. He missed the next day, too, and the next.

Annie found it impossible to care about her schoolwork. She was getting better at sketching Jazzberry and Fidget, and she spent the time when she should have been studying and doing homework drawing pictures and daydreaming about living with fairies.

Jazzberry wouldn't talk about how they lived. Did they have fairy rings, did they ride on the backs of birds, did they steal human children, and would they please steal Annie? "We're not supposed to talk about that," was all the fairy would say.

Finally one evening, June called Annie during dinner and said that Max was ready to tell them what he'd learned. Annie asked her parents if she could go over to June's to study after they ate, and they said yes.

"I don't know if it's much of a story," Max said when Annie and June had settled themselves on the floor of his room. "I can't find anything shady or illegal. But it's sad that they're going to bulldoze that hill just to build houses."

"When will they start?" Annie said.

"They're waiting on the civil engineering," Max said. The two girls stared at him blankly. "The developers have agreed to make improvements to the roads and sewer systems and to install underground utilities," he explained. "The engineers are finalizing the plans for those projects. When that's done, they'll know the total cost of the project and then they can proceed."

"When?" Annie said.

"About three weeks."

Annie had been hoping that Jazzberry and Fidget had been wrong about the start date, and they would have more time. She fought down a feeling of panic. Surely Max could tell them something they could use.

"Who's doing it?" June said.

"The Enchanted Woods Development Group is three partners. One is named Dennis Rust. Is he a relative of yours, Annie?"

"He's my uncle."

"Huh. Well, he's kind of out of his league."

“What do you mean?”

“The other two are heavy hitters. There’s a real estate developer, Mannie Yanny. He’s a big shot rich guy who’s built things all over town. Not a very nice person, I’ve heard. The third partner is the president of the bank that’s going to make the construction loan, Jonas Miller. I’d call that a conflict of interest, but it’s not illegal. And he’s no sweetheart, either.”

He told them a lot of other details, but most of it made no sense to Annie, and the rest was useless. They thanked Max and he said no problem and turned his stereo up. They went to June’s room.

“Three more weeks,” Annie said glumly.

“I wrote down the names,” June said. “Mannie Yanny and Jonas Miller. What do you think?”

“Do you know those people?”

“No.”

“Max said Mannie is mean, and the other one owns the bank and is even meaner.”

“He’s president of the bank. It’s not the same thing.”

“He still won’t talk to us. And they won’t listen if we just ask them not to cut down the woods.”

“Maybe we can tell them why,” June said.

“Oh, right. Dear Mr. Rich Bad Man, please don’t kill our friends the fairies. Signed, Annie and June.”

They sat on June’s bed and looked at each other for a long time without saying anything.

“I have to go home,” Annie said at last.

“See you in school tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Annie lay in her bed that night, staring at the ceiling. It wasn’t fair. How could Jazzberry and Fidget expect her to do this? If it were just Uncle Dennis, maybe she could convince him. But he had rich and powerful partners, and there was nothing she could do to even get their attention, let alone get them to stop construction. For all she knew, if they found out about the dragons and fairies, they might start even sooner, just to be nasty.

She spent half the night awake, restless and tossing under her covers, wishing that Jazzberry would fly through the window and tell her that everything was okay—or that the fairy had never flown through her window in the first place.

## Chapter 5: Schoolyard

The nightmare continued the next morning when Mrs. Longsnout gave them a surprise history and geography quiz. Annie spent the entire half hour going over the list of questions again and again, trying to find even one she knew the answer to. In the end she handed in a sheet that was blank except for her name.

June turned around and raised her eyebrows, asking how she'd done. Annie sunk her head onto her arms and wished she could melt away like a snowman in the spring sunshine. Not even correctly answering a hard question in math later in the day made her feel better.

"What do I care about Africa and Asia and Antparkata?" she complained to Jazzberry that afternoon.

"Why wouldn't you be curious about your world?" Fidget said. "Don't you want to know everything about the place where you were born?"

"I wasn't born in Egypt," Annie said. "I was born here, in Leftover."

"But it's all the same place," Fidget persisted. "The Nile isn't that far away. Look."

He clapped his hands and a large globe of the Earth hung between them in the warm daylight. It was like no globe Annie had ever seen. About a quarter of the planet was covered with brilliant white clouds, and there were no labels or colors on the continents. The oceans were deep blue, the land brown or green with small patches of gray here and there.

The globe rotated so the familiar shape of North America hung before them. A brilliant point of light appeared almost halfway from top to bottom, about a third of the way in from the right, and it started blinking on and off.

"Here's where we are," the dragon said.

Annie reached out to touch the globe, but her hand passed through it without feeling anything. Where her fingers reached inside the planet, they were invisible.

"Now look," Fidget said, and he twirled a finger. The globe rotated slowly to the left and a red line arced out from the blinking point and traveled across the Atlantic Ocean as the world turned. Just before Leftover vanished around the left edge of the globe, the line stopped and another light began blinking in the upper corner of Africa, near the right edge.

"Leftover and Cairo are separated by about a third of the circumference of the Earth," Fidget said. "An astronaut on the Moon could see you both at the same time. They're your *neighbors*."

"But I've never met them."

"That doesn't matter," Jazzberry said. "You breathe the same air, drink the same water, and you share the same ancestors. They may be strangers, but they're not just neighbors. They're your family."

Fidget let the globe turn again. When the spark that was Leftover came into view once more, he waved a hand and the Earth vanished.

"How did you do that?" June said.

"That's my secret," Fidget said slyly.

"Was it magic?" Annie said.

"Annie," Jazzberry scolded, "I told you we don't do magic."

"Right," Fidget said. "It was coherent projection using an imbedded neuron-triggered graviton-powered coercer and ambient photons resulting in a virtual hologram."

"It was magic," June said firmly.

“Also a hundred years of practice,” Fidget said.

“Would you like to see Egypt?” Jazzberry said.

“We just did.”

“No, I don’t mean a projection. Would you like to *see* it?”

“Maybe someday,” Annie said doubtfully. Her parents didn’t even let her take the city bus alone. Would they let her go to Africa?

“Why not today?” Fidget said.

Annie stared at the dragon. What did he mean, get on a plane and go? What would she tell her parents?

“How?” she said.

Fidget leaped into the air and hovered, his wings flapping slowly and loudly. “I can fly,” he said.

“You can’t carry me,” Annie said.

Fidget swooped down and grabbed Annie from behind with all four paws. His claws were extended just a tiny bit, enough to get a grip, but not enough to hurt her. Annie squealed in surprise as they fell up into the sky. When they were hovering just above the treetops, Fidget swiveled slowly, showing her the town, the fields, and the hills and rivers surrounding her home. She had never been in a plane before, so she had never seen how beautiful Leftover was from the air. They settled slowly to the ground.

“I told you I was strong,” the dragon said proudly.

“Do you want to go see Egypt?” Jazzberry asked Annie. She could only nod happily, her eyes wide with delight. The fairy turned to June. “I’m going to help, but Fidget will be doing most of the work. He’s strong, but he won’t be able to take all four of us. So your turn is going to have to wait for another day.”

“I understand,” June said sadly. She was disappointed but trying to be generous. “Annie needs it more than I do. She’s the one flunking out of school.”

Annie stuck her tongue out at her friend.

“Think about where you want to go when it’s your turn,” Fidget said. “Wherever you’ve most wanted to go in your life.”

“I will.” June took one step back. “When will you be back?”

“In about two hours,” Jazzberry said. “Ready, Annie?”

“I’m ready.”

“Let’s go, Fidget.”

Jazzberry flew up and sat on Fidget’s head, between his tall ears. Fidget hopped up, grabbed Annie from behind like before, and they shot up into the air.

June watched them flash into the afternoon light above the trees and then vanish into the blue sky. She started down the hill toward her bike.

\* \* \*

They flew through the air with the sun at their backs. The ground whipped by a long way below, but Annie felt nothing but a gentle breeze on her face. She thought she should be cold, but she was very comfortable.

“How are you doing this?” she said.

“If we stood still,” Fidget said in his lecturing voice, “and let the Earth turn beneath us, it would take eight hours to get there. Not very efficient. So I’ve put us in a very low, powered orbit. We should be there in half an hour or so.”

“I mean, why can’t I feel the wind?”

“Well, I made an inertial shield bubble, of course. It helps reduce friction, too.”

“A what?”

“A windshield,” Jazzberry said. “Fidget, stop showing off.”

The sun had vanished below the horizon behind them and the sky was getting dark above. Annie was going to ask why night was falling so rapidly, but then she remembered something from school: night and day are caused by the Earth turning beneath the sun. So if they flew toward the setting sun—west—the day would last longer and if they flew away from it—east—the day would be shorter. But eventually they would fly toward the rising sun, so the night would be shorter, too.

“Will it be night when we get to Africa?” she said.

“Yes,” Jazzberry answered.

“How will I see anything?”

“We’ll help you.”

They swept through thick clouds and suddenly they were over the ocean. A sliver of moon rose before them, but it was enough to show the waves squishing around far below. Annie craned back to see the receding land and noticed that Fidget’s wings were barely moving.

“You’re not flapping your wings!” she said. He wasn’t flying, it was some kind of trick.

“I can’t *fly* like a bird fast enough to get us there in a reasonable period of time,” the dragon said. “So I’m *flying* us there like an airplane. Well, more like a rocket ship, really.”

“Where’s the rocket?” she said suspiciously.

“I said *like* a rocket ship. We’re actually falling toward an artificial attractor that I’m shifting with my coercer.”

“You’re bragging again,” Jazzberry said.

“Sorry. Okay, Annie, do you know why you fall back to the ground when you jump up?”

“Gravity?”

“Right. And what is gravity?”

“Um...” He gave her a minute but she couldn’t come up with anything. She just knew the name.

“It’s a force that draws matter together. Matter is very friendly stuff. It wants to stick together, something like magnets but not as strong. So I made a heavy thing that’s flying just ahead of us, and we’re falling into it. I keep pushing it away, and it drags us after it. Understand?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Fidget said. “Pretend it’s magic.”

“Fidget!” Jazzberry scolded.

“Sorry.”

They flew on and suddenly there was land underneath them again. The waves of water far beneath them were now replaced by waves of sand. The sculpted dunes of the Sahara spread out in the moonlight like the fingerprints of a god. Far to the left Annie could just make out the edge of a sea. The sand went on and on, until suddenly below them a silvery ribbon wiggled through the desert. They stopped and hung above it.

“Let’s go up a bit,” Jazzberry said. They rose swiftly until the ribbon was a thread.

It was hard to see much in the dim light from the moon. Annie peered in one direction, then another, but all she saw was endless desert with a thin line of quicksilver running through it.

Then her eyes must have got used to the darkness, or Fidget did something, because she could see as well as in day. Far away, straight ahead, was a large body of water, and the sea that had been just visible to the north was now easily seen. Below, for miles and miles, was nothing but sand.

Jazzberry and Fidget began to tell her what she was looking at: the sea to the north was the Mediterranean, the one to the east was the Red Sea, the river below them was the Nile. Fidget flew them north along the river. Jazzberry pointed out a sort of trench that ran northeast until it reached the sea: that was the East Africa Rift Valley, a four thousand mile long tear in the earth that continued through the Dead Sea and the Jordan River.

“The eastern edge of Africa is pulling away from the rest of the continent,” she said. “Someday that will be a sea like the Mediterranean.”

“Did you know that the Mediterranean Sea used to be dry land?” Fidget said. Annie shook her head. “Long ago, you could walk from Libya to Sicily to Italy. There was a natural dam at Gibraltar that broke open and flooded the whole thing.”

“The Earth is like a living thing,” Jazzberry said. “It changes all the time. Some people think that things have always been the way they are, but the truth is that nothing stays the same for very long. Not even the seas.”

They spent an hour swooping over Cairo, buzzing the pyramids, following the Nile River upstream past a huge dam. By the time Fidget said they should start back, Annie was exhausted and exhilarated.

The flight back was quiet and uneventful. She was already used to flying in the clutches of a dragon. Fidget set her down gently in the dusky woods. She said goodbye and ran down the trail to her bike. When she walked inside her house, everything seemed brighter and clearer than usual.

“You’re just in time,” her mother said. “Wash your hands for dinner.”

That night, Annie made time to study and discovered that geography could be just as interesting as math and English—if she only looked at it in the right way.

\* \* \*

Annie’s school still believed in letting children outdoors at the lunch recess. Annie and June were sitting under a tree with their heads together as Annie told about her flight.

“Where do you think you’ll go?” she asked June.

“Antarctica,” June said. “I want to see the penguins. And the big floating glaciers.”

“Isn’t it cold down there?”

“Sure, but you said Fidget kept you warm.”

“Oh, right.”

“Hey, Rusty!” someone yelled. They looked up and saw Trevor Bridges swaggering toward them.

“Oh, no,” Annie said. Trevor was the biggest bully in the fifth grade. He was two years older than them and thought he was the king of the swings.

“Ignore him,” June suggested.

“How?” Annie said. “He looks like a rhino.”

The bully stood a few feet away, with a group of his followers clustered behind him, sniggering. He actually looked more like a hippopotamus than a rhinoceros: he had a flat face and was large for his age, beefy but not actually fat. Annie had heard that he worked out with weights, which she thought was a ridiculous thing for a ten-year old to do.

“Hey, Rusty,” Trevor said, “where’s your fairy?”

Annie felt her stomach knot up. How did he know about the fairies? She looked at June, who shrugged her shoulders, frowning.

“If you’re speaking to me,” Annie said without looking at him, “my name is Annie Rust.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a rusty brain. That’s why I call you Rusty.”

“I guess I should call you Shrinky, then.”

“Huh?”

“Cause your brain must have shrunk in the washer.”

“Watch it, Rusty, or else.”

“Or else what?” Annie said. She stood up. “Are you going to beat up a girl?”

“Yeah. I don’t care if you’re a girl or a gorilla. I’ll use your head for a weed whacker.”

“You’re the gorilla.”

“Well, you’re the fairy princess,” Trevor said. “Why don’t you call your little flying things to come save you? I’ll catch ’em in my butterfly net and stick pins in ’em.”

“I don’t need fairies to save me. I can beat you up anytime.”

Trevor’s gang went “Ooh” and “Uh oh” and “Ouch” like a flock of pigeons. His face went red and he clenched his fist.

“What did you say?”

“Don’t do it, Annie,” June said.

“Stay out of this, Newman,” he growled.

Annie raised her left hand with the palm toward the ground and fluttered it up toward Trevor’s eyes like Jazzberry floating in the meadow. He scowled and reached to bat it away from his face. She kicked him firmly in the shin with one shiny, hard, black shoe. He cried out and bent down to grab his injured leg, and Annie pushed him over with one finger.

June jumped up and the two of them ran toward the school building. Annie sang out loudly, “Trevor Bridges falling down, falling down, falling down.”

“He’s going to get you for that,” June said when they stood just outside the door.

“No, he won’t. Next time I’ll really beat him up.” She wiped sweat off her face. “I’m not worried about Trevor. But who told him about the fairies?”

They looked at each other for a moment and said together, “Otto.”

“I’ll kill him,” Annie said.

The bell rang to call the kids back to school. June opened the door and they walked down the hall toward their class.

“We’re stuck,” Annie said, “and we’re almost out of time. There’s only one way to save Jazzberry and Fidget. I have to introduce them to Uncle Dennis.”

“What?” June hissed. “Don’t you think that enough people know already?”

“You don’t think Trevor really believes there are fairies in the woods, do you? If he did, he’d be up there right now with his butterfly net.” They reached their classroom. Annie went to her seat and flopped down into it. June sat in her usual place right in front of her. “Uncle Dennis created this problem,” Annie said. “He’s just going to have to help us fix it.”

## Chapter 6: Kidnapped

Otto wasn't on the bus, but when Annie stepped off it she spotted him down the block. He started running the moment he saw her coming, but she was older and bigger and she caught up to him one house away from his front door.

"Why did you do it?" she screamed. He shrank as if she would start pelting him with punches, but she just stood there, red-faced, waiting for him to admit his betrayal. This took about ten seconds.

"He heard me arguing with my mom," Otto said when it became clear she wasn't going to kill him immediately. "It was in our backyard, I think he was standing outside the fence listening."

"To what? Did you tell your mom about Jazzberry and Fidget?"

"No!" he squealed. "I wouldn't do that. But she wasn't going to let me go up to the woods with you guys."

It was true. After the first week or so, Otto had stopped coming.

"She said I shouldn't be going up there alone every day. When I told her I wasn't alone, I was with you and June, her face got all funny and she said I definitely shouldn't be going up there with *girls*. I think..." He sputtered and stopped.

"What?"

"I think she's afraid you're my girlfriend."

Annie stared at him for a moment and burst out laughing. Otto looked hurt.

"I'm sorry, Otto," she said. "What happened with Trevor?"

"My mom said I had to stay on the block, so I was just riding around on my bike. Trevor rode up on that cool French bike he has and knocked me down. He sat on my chest and asked me what I was doing up in the woods with you and June. He was all slapping my face and tickling me and saying we were k-k-kissing up in the woods. I told him no we weren't, and he said okay then, what *were* we doing?"

"So you told him about the fairies and the dragons."

Otto hung his head. Annie felt sorry for him; her anger had melted away. She put an arm around his shoulders and said, "It's okay, Otto. He didn't believe you."

"He didn't?"

"No, he probably thinks we were playing with dolls or something." Otto looked happier for a moment, then he looked sad again. "Now what's wrong?"

"Great. Now Trevor Bridges thinks I play with dolls in the woods."

"It's better than thinking you're playing with fairies."

"He's going to beat me up every week for the rest of my life."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Annie said, and she walked him home.

\* \* \*

She was determined to ask for Uncle Dennis's help, but she couldn't think of a sly way to do it. That left her no option but the obvious one. On Saturday morning, Annie rode her bike to her aunt and uncle's house, parked her bike on the walkway, and rang the doorbell.

Aunt Helen answered the door with her evil poodle, Mr. Snowball, in her arms. "Why, Annie, whatever are you doing here? Come in."

The poodle snapped at her as she squeezed past her aunt. She said hello to the cockatoo, who said “Hi” back.

“Is Uncle Dennis here, Aunt Helen?”

“Yes, he’s in his study. But he doesn’t like to be disturbed when he’s working, dear. Maybe you could come back tomorrow with your parents?”

“I’d like to see him now, please. It’s kind of important.”

“Oh, dear. Is anything wrong?”

“Not yet,” Annie said.

Her aunt dithered for a moment before deciding to interrupt Uncle Dennis. He came out from the back of the house a moment later, frowning.

“Hi, Annie. What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you about something,” she said. He smiled and waited, as if he expected her to say it in front of her crazy aunt. “Um, can we go somewhere... else. It’s—” She glanced at her aunt. “It’s private.”

“Oh, I see,” Uncle Dennis said. Aunt Helen smiled shyly as if they were going away to discuss her Christmas present. “Come on back to my study.”

This was a room Annie had never seen before. There were two tall bookcases, both of them full of books, and big pictures of elephants and zebras on the walls, and a huge desk with two computers and a lot of papers on top. Uncle Dennis cleared a pile of papers off a chair and Annie sat down.

How was she going to tell him? She had thought about this for two days and had not come up with a plan. So she blurted out the simple truth.

“I need you to help me with a secret,” she said.

“I see.” He settled himself into the big chair in front of the desk. “Why are you asking me? Can’t your dad help you?”

“Not with this.”

“Oh. What about your mom?”

“You’re the only one who can help me, Uncle Dennis.”

“Does it have something to do with computers?” he said.

“It’s really hard to explain. I have to show you.”

“Oh. Okay.” He reached out a hand as if she could put her problem into his palm.

“Not here,” she said. “Can you come with me?”

“Come with you? Well... I was right in the middle of something when you—”

“It’s important,” she interrupted.

Uncle Dennis looked at her quietly for a moment. His eyes were half-closed as if he were tired. Finally he said, “Should we walk or drive?”

“Drive, please.”

She followed him back to the living room.

“Annie and I are going for a short drive,” he told Aunt Helen. He picked up his keys and wallet from the kitchen counter and Annie followed him out to the garage. The door closed as Aunt Helen was saying, “But where—”

She got into the passenger seat of his big, white car. “Where to?” he said.

“The Haunted Woods, please,” Annie said.

Uncle Dennis nodded. He didn’t look surprised.

\* \* \*

He took it better than June and Otto had. When Fidget stopped pretending to be a tiger and plopped onto the ground in front of him, Uncle Dennis merely sat down hard. He didn't even faint.

"What?" he said after a moment. "What is that?"

"I'm a dragon," Fidget said, rubbing the tips of his ears together.

"There are no dragons."

"There are no computer store owners who want to build houses," Fidget replied snidely.

"You, you can t-talk!" Uncle Dennis said.

"Better than you can, apparently."

"Stop showing off, Fidget," Jazzberry said. She flew from wherever she'd been hiding to hover directly in front of Annie's uncle. "Is this your uncle?" she asked Annie.

"Yes," she said.

"That can't be a fairy!" Uncle Dennis said.

"That can't be a human!" Fidget responded.

"Fidget!" Jazzberry scolded. She turned back to Annie. "Was this really necessary?"

"There's no other way," Annie said. "I'm just a kid. I can't stop a bank all by myself. Even if I could find out who to talk to, they'd never see me. Uncle Dennis is an adult. He can help us."

"Help you with what?" her uncle said.

"You have to stop the development," Jazzberry said. "If you don't—" She paused.

"If you don't," Annie said, "you'll kill all the fairies and all the dragons."

"What?" he said.

"I'm afraid it's even worse than that," Jazzberry said. "We haven't told Annie everything. If you proceed with trying to cut down the Haunted Woods, it's not just *our* lives that will be in danger. All the humans in this area could be in jeopardy."

"What do you mean, this area?" he said.

"North America," Jazzberry said. "Possibly farther."

Now Annie had to sit down.

\* \* \*

Uncle Dennis was still digesting things when Jazzberry suddenly turned and floated higher off the ground.

"Do you feel that?" she asked Fidget.

"Yes," the dragon said sadly. "Now our bacon's in the fire."

"What?" Annie said. "What is it?"

"Our game is over," Jazzberry said.

"What game? What are you talking about?"

"JAZZBERRY!" a voice boomed from the trees. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

Fidget ran behind Annie and rolled up into a ball tight up against her back. "Wake me up when it's over," his muffled voice said.

"FIDGET!" the voice called. "STAND UP AND ACCOUNT FOR YOURSELF."

"What's going on?" Uncle Dennis said. He stood up and tried to see who was speaking so loudly.

"Fidget and I are about to be punished," Jazzberry said.

"For what?"

"We're not supposed to talk to humans. Ever."

“But—” Uncle Dennis stopped talking as a flock of fairies flew out of the woods into the clearing.

There were half a dozen of them, some with spiky hair that was fiery red, others with deep blue. They were about six inches tall, dressed in filmy robes of white or lavender or pale yellow. They flew gracefully and silently into the clearing and stopped, hovering in the sunlight with slow strokes of their butterfly wings.

For a long time, the fairies stared quietly at Annie and her uncle. Then they turned to Jazzberry.

“I thought you knew the rules,” one of the red-haired fairies said. “I thought you were old enough to play outside. We trusted you with young Fidget. What have you done?”

“I’ve tried to save us,” Jazzberry said boldly. “The council couldn’t do what was necessary, so Fidget and I have done it for you.”

“You’ve doomed these humans.”

“I’m trying to save them,” Jazzberry said.

Uncle Dennis said, “What’s going—”

“QUIET!” the red-haired fairy said. “Our children have broken our laws by revealing themselves to you. Your fate will depend in part on your behavior and your manners. Be wise, pay attention, and don’t speak until we ask you to.”

Annie looked at her uncle, and he looked back and shrugged. He didn’t look frightened, but Annie was so scared she didn’t even think about standing up. She knew her knees would give way as soon as she tried it.

If they could fly her around the world in two hours, what could they do if they thought she should be punished?

“Fidget,” one of the blue-haired fairies said. “Come out.”

Fidget unrolled himself and stepped in front of Annie. “Don’t hurt her,” he said. “It’s not her fault. We came to her and asked for help, and she offered it freely.”

“We’ll consider that,” the red-haired fairy said, “along with everything else. Willowleaf?”

“Back to the council ring,” the blue-haired fairy said.

“Get up, little girl,” the other one said kindly.

“Annie,” Annie said. She struggled to her feet and was surprised that she stayed up.

“Come with us, Annie. You too, sir.”

“Dennis.”

“Dennis. Follow us.”

The flock of fairies turned and led the way into the woods. Annie and Uncle Dennis followed as well as they could. There were no trails, and the fairies seemed not to care how thick the undergrowth was: they flew in a straight line, leaving it up to the humans to find a way through the brambles and shrubs. Jazzberry flew on one side of Annie and Fidget flew on the other. As they went deeper into the woods, the light seemed to fade. It was still day; Annie could see sunshine streaming down between the trees. But somehow it was getting darker despite the light from above. It got harder and harder to push their way through the bushes, until suddenly they broke through into a strange space.

The trees formed a high canopy above a large open space that was almost perfectly round. Within the clearing there were no trees and no undergrowth, only grass and flowers. Annie didn’t see how there could be enough light for the grass to grow, since the branches overhead

completely blocked the sky, leaving the clearing dim and dusky, even though it was an hour or more until sunset.

“Sit here,” Jazzberry said, landing on a tree trunk that grew horizontally, about two feet off the ground. Annie and Uncle Dennis sat down on the rough bark and looked around.

The trees around the edge of the open space, whose wide branches formed the ceiling of this outdoor room, were all enormous oaks. The fairies that had led them there had vanished. Annie tried not to fidget, but Fidget, sitting beside her on the tree bench, couldn't help himself. He scratched his ear, rubbed his feet, stretched his neck, gaped his jaws, and flicked his wings.

“Fidget,” Jazzberry hissed, “hold still.”

Suddenly, Annie noticed that they weren't alone any more. On every tree branch and behind every trunk were dozens, hundreds of fairies and dragons. The fairies were all dressed very much alike, in gauzy robes of many colors, and each one's hair was violet, yellow, red, or blue. The dragons were mostly larger than Fidget, about the size of a collie. Their scales were green, brown, or black. None of them made a sound, which was the scariest thing so far.

The fairies that had led them through the woods floated into the center of the clearing, along with several others and about ten dragons. They flew silently to the center of the open space and settled to the ground. Instantly, a ring of mushrooms blossomed out of the grass, surrounding them with a short fence of thin stems and pointed caps.

“Council is in session,” said the red-haired fairy who had talked before. “Jazzberry and Fidget, explain yourselves if you can.”

## Chapter 7: The Hollow Hill

Jazzberry flew out to the edge of the mushroom fence and began singing in a voice so beautiful and lyrical that it took Annie a moment to realize that she couldn't follow the words.

"Speak in English so your friends can understand you," the red-haired fairy said.

"You've been debating this problem for over a year," Jazzberry said boldly. "Talk has gotten us nowhere because what we needed was action. Now we have less than a month before the big machines come to destroy our home, and millions of human lives are at risk. Fidget and I realized that your problem was that you were concentrating on the adults."

"They put us on this path," the blue-haired fairy said. "They are the only ones who can change their course."

"But you haven't even tried to convince them."

"We can't just show ourselves and frighten them as we did centuries ago," he said. "Humans have become too jaded; we can destroy them, but they would never believe it until they were actually dying. If we reveal ourselves, they'll either *try* to wipe us out or try to catch us for a zoo or a TV program."

"Some humans cannot be trusted," Jazzberry said. "But it never occurred to you to contact the children."

The dragons in the trees rustled their wings. It sounded like autumn wind blowing through dead leaves.

"Children can still believe without fear or hate," she said. "And they can identify the adults who can be trusted."

Fidget jumped out to stand beside Jazzberry. "I have watched the human children for many years," he said. "Some are cruel, some have been twisted by pain or ignorance or hate. But most are good. When Annie met us, she didn't try to catch us and put us in a box. She asked us to adopt *her*."

The wings rustled again.

"The problem with children," Jazzberry continued, "is that they are good but powerless. For several weeks, Annie and her friends have been trying to find a way to stop this on their own. But they don't know enough, they don't have enough experience, and no adult will take them seriously. So Annie brought her uncle, one of the men who is planning the development, to meet us and decide for himself."

Uncle Dennis stood up suddenly. "And it worked," he said. There was a hissing noise coming from the trees, but he ignored it. "Jazzberry was right to do what she did. I had no idea that our plans would harm anyone; I had no idea I was putting you all in danger. I'll do everything I can to stop the project now, but I don't have the final say. I can't dissolve the partnership unilaterally. I'll have to figure out how to convince my partners to give up the profits they would have earned by building those houses."

"*Not* by bringing them to meet us," the red-haired fairy said.

"No," Dennis said. "I don't think that would work. I'm afraid my partners are exactly the kind of people who would try to trap you and put you on TV."

He sat down. Annie reached over and took his hand. She was so proud of him. She would never have been brave enough to talk back to the fairies.

"Annie," the red-haired fairy said. "Tell us what *you* think we should do."

Jazzberry and Fidget turned to look at her. When she didn't move, Uncle Dennis nudged her discreetly. Slowly, Annie stood up.

"I..." She looked at the fairies and dragons in the mushroom ring, and up in the trees. All of them were looking at her. Her knees were shaking, and she almost sat down again, but then she heard herself start talking. "I guess I don't understand why you just can't move. But Jazzberry says you can't, so we have to stop them from cutting down the woods somehow. I don't know how yet, but with Uncle Dennis, and if you do some magic—I mean, if you work with us too, maybe we can win. I'll do anything to save your home."

There was a long silence. Annie stumbled back to her seat on the log. The fairies and dragons in the ring talked among themselves for a while, too quietly for Annie to hear them, or even to tell if they were speaking English. It was getting dark now, and harder to see the flying things in the trees. Finally one of the dragons reared up on its hind legs and looked right at her.

"Time to eat," it said.

\* \* \*

When the mushroom ring melted back into the ground, Jazzberry led Annie and Dennis to a large fire pit. In a moment there was a roaring fire going, though there had been no firewood there beforehand. They sat down on big, flat stones set in a circle all around the fire. A green-scaled dragon came around with a tray of mugs. Annie took one and tasted it: fizzy water, with a hint of something fruity.

"Carnivore or herbivore?" someone asked from behind her.

She turned and saw another dragon, this one with black, glistening scales.

"What?" she said.

"Carnivore or herbivore?"

"What do fairies eat?" Annie said.

The dragon slowly scratched his snout with a claw-tip. "Well, now. A young fairy will eat just about anything. You have to be careful when they're really young, their teeth are quite sharp and they're likely to try to take a bite out of a passing pet, or a dragon, for that matter. When they're mature, though, they give up meat and become herbivores."

"What about dragons?" Dennis said.

"Ah." The dragon smiled, showing several rows of needle-sharp teeth. He snapped his jaw closed with an audible clack. "I'm afraid we're constrained by biology. We can't digest plants."

"I'm a vegetarian," Annie said.

"No, you're not," Uncle Dennis said. "We grilled burgers at our house a few weeks ago."

"Well, I am now."

"You don't have to be a vegetarian just because adult fairies are," Jazzberry said. "I still eat meat sometimes."

"Herbivore," she said firmly to the black dragon. He bowed and smiled again.

"Carnivore," Dennis said just as firmly. The dragon walked away.

Several of the fairies who had stood within the mushroom ring came to sit with them.

"You've met Talltree," Jazzberry said, bowing to the red-haired fairy by flitting into the air and inclining her entire body. Then she turned to the blue-haired one and bowed again. "This is Willowleaf. They're the Elders."

"*The Elders?*" Dennis said. "The oldest?"

“The eldest male and female always have a position on the council,” Talltree said. “Although I also happen to be the council leader.” His sudden laughter was like snowflakes drifting in the sun. “Which simply means I call them to order and must never fall asleep during session.”

The black dragon came back, handing Dennis and Fidget what looked like giant turkey legs. He gave Annie a warm bundle wrapped in some kind of thick, tough paper. She opened it and found a delicious-smelling stir-fry, which she immediately started eating with her fingers. They had spent the whole day in the woods and she’d missed lunch.

“Which of you is female?” Dennis said.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Willowleaf said.

Annie stopped eating long enough to look closely. It was hard to tell because of their loose robes, but Talltree and Willowleaf seemed to have exactly the same body shape and neither had facial hair. The only real difference was the color of their hair.

“Females are born with violet hair that ages to blue,” Willowleaf said. “Males are born with yellow hair that ages to red.”

“It’s a lot harder to tell with dragons,” Fidget said around a mouthful of turkey. “We don’t change color and there are three sexes.”

“Three sexes?” Annie said. “What are you talking about? Aren’t you a boy?”

“He’s one kind of boy,” Jazzberry said. “Dragons have two different ways of being male.”

“There’s no species like that on Earth,” Dennis said.

“There is now,” Talltree said. “And there has been for a while. Let me tell you a story.”

\* \* \*

Long ago, so long ago that no one can quite remember when it happened, two groups of explorers met while they were both investigating a strange star. Neither group had ever before encountered another race capable of traveling through space, and they were ecstatic to finally meet some neighbors, even though it took some time to learn to talk together.

When they did, though, it was hard to get them to shut up. They had so much to say, and so much to hear, and they liked each other so much that they swapped half of their crews. Each ship went back to its home world carrying guests from the other ship.

The two peoples became close friends, and they never traveled alone again. Each of them had strengths the other lacked, each of them had ways of seeing the universe that the other had never thought of. Together they were smarter and stronger than they could ever have been apart. So they embarked on new adventures, always together, and this went on for half a galactic day.

(“That’s over a hundred million years!” Dennis said.

“Shh,” Annie hissed.)

One of the survey ships working in an outer arm of the galaxy came upon a sun whose third planet had something they’d never seen before: a race of intelligent beings that, except for their large size and the lack of wings, looked exactly like one of the explorer races. They had observed other intelligences before, but this was the first time they had seen anything that looked familiar.

(“What did the *other* aliens look like?” Annie said.

“Shh,” Dennis said.)

They stayed long after they had finished cataloguing the planets of this star, because they were curious about the flightless giants. They wanted to know everything about them.

But then came disaster. During routine maintenance on their ship, something went wrong and they lost the ability to leave the system. As time went by, the ship deteriorated more and more, until finally they realized that very soon they wouldn’t be able to move the ship at all.

So they flew their ship one last time to a sparsely inhabited place that could support them. They landed the ship and buried it under a huge mound of dirt, leaving only a hidden cave as the means to get in and out. The ship shut down, except for producing the rare nutrients that the explorers couldn't get from native food. They sent a message to their friends at home, but it would be a long, long time before help could come.

While they were waiting, the explorers continued to observe the giants, and over time the natives built a civilization, and grew in numbers, until the remote spot they'd chosen to hide the ship was right on the edge of a major city. And then some of the natives decided to strip the hill of trees and build houses on top. But in the process, of course, they would discover what lay beneath the hill, and now disaster loomed again.

Because the ship is guarded by terrible warriors, who are not completely under the control of the other explorers. If the ship is disturbed, they will emerge from their long slumber, and their only goal in life is to protect the ship at all costs. No one knows what they might do if they perceive the flightless giants to be a threat.

This is why we have to stop your partners.

\* \* \*

Annie had finished eating and she was getting sleepy. She was having trouble following the conversation after Talltree finished his story.

Was it true? Were the fairies and dragons not really magic, but just aliens? She thought aliens would be nasty, mean, and ugly, and try to eat people. But adult fairies didn't even eat meat at all. Was there really a spaceship in the hill under the Haunted Woods? She'd like to see a spaceship...

"Lie down here," Jazzberry said, tugging at Annie's arm. She slid off the log and lay down in the soft leaves beside it. Fidget brought a blanket from somewhere and covered her up.

"I have some questions," Annie mumbled.

"Later," Jazzberry said. She flew down and kissed Annie's cheek.

Annie woke several times during the night. She heard Uncle Dennis's voice, but now the deeper voices of dragons were weaving in among the tinkling sounds of the fairies. She only caught snatches of what they were saying before she dropped back off to sleep.

"One guardian is always awake," a dragon said. "Admales grow to a huge size if they're fed the right nutrients during a critical point in their growth."

"I don't understand the purpose of three sexes," Dennis said.

"What's the purpose of life itself?" the dragon responded. "That's the way sexual reproduction evolved on our planet."

Later, she thought she heard Jazzberry say, "She's flunking her classes in school because of us."

"I'll take care of it," Willowleaf said. "Shall I give her everything?"

"No, that would make her stand out. Adult knowledge would be a handicap to a human child."

"I've spent a lifetime studying them, but sometimes I don't understand them at all."

"Yes, mama. No, don't do it now, she's awake. Wait until she falls asleep again."

Then there were strange dreams. She was flying over the whole world, just as she'd done with Jazzberry and Fidget to Egypt, but much faster and everything glowed with impossible detail. She could see from one edge of the Earth to another, but if she focused she could watch a

woman walking her dog in Budapest or a man reading a newspaper in a park in Lima while his son played on the swings. She hadn't even known that she knew the names of those places.

She woke again.

"I don't understand," Dennis said. "How can you be so intelligent with such a small brain?"

A fairy said, "How can your species have such a large brain and be so stupid?"

A dragon laughed. "Do you suppose there's only one way to organize a mind? You haven't even figured out how your own brains work. Some parrots speak and think better than some humans, and they have small heads."

Again she awoke, and no one was speaking. The fire crackled cheerfully. Its light shone on the canopy of trees above. She could see a few stars winking through the branches, and she recognized half a dozen of them: Vega, Deneb, Altair. When had she learned the names of the stars?

When morning came, Annie sat up and stretched. She looked around. Uncle Dennis was sleeping close to the fire pit, where the fire had finally gone out. She turned her head and came face to face with Fidget, who was sitting on top of the log, grinning and rubbing the top of his head with the tip of his tail.

"Sleep well?" he said.

"Uh huh. Um... I need to go..."

"This way," he said. She followed him to a secluded place well away from where she'd slept. He vanished while she peed. She found her own way back.

Fidget handed her another package wrapped in rough paper. It was a completely different kind of food from last night, rice mixed with fruits, sweet and very tasty. Annie ate it with her fingers, since she'd been offered no fork.

Uncle Dennis woke up as she was finishing.

"What's the time?" he said, and stared at his watch. "Oh, my god, they'll think we've been kidnapped. Annie, we have to go."

He jumped up, but stopped as if he'd thought of something.

"What?" Annie said.

"I have about a thousand more questions to ask them."

"Later," Jazzberry said, flying slowly toward them. Fidget was back on the log. None of the others were visible. "We'll lead you home."

They followed Jazzberry and Fidget back to the council clearing and then into the trees. It took a long time to reach the places that Annie was familiar with. She hadn't realized that the Haunted Woods was this large. But then she visualized it from the air and saw that the hill was really quite big, covering more than a hundred acres. Like Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood, she thought.

"Good luck in school on Monday," Jazzberry said when they parted, and she and Fidget laughed as they flew away. What was so funny?

There was no police car at her house, but Uncle Dennis had to explain three times that he and Annie had been hiking in the woods, got lost after dark, and decided it was safer to sleep under beds of leaves than to stumble around in the night.

"But what were you doing up there all day?" her mother said. She was still crying.

"Studying the wildlife," Dennis said. "It's really a remarkable place, you know. There are deer up there, and lots of butterflies, and birds of all kinds."

"Too bad you're going to mow it all down," her father said.

“Well... I might have to rethink that,” Dennis said. Her father jerked in surprise. “Hey, I’ve got to go. I’m so sorry this happened, Ray, Laura, I didn’t mean to alarm you.” He leaned over to say goodbye to Annie. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough for this,” he whispered, and kissed her on the cheek.

“You’d better take a shower,” her mother said when Dennis was gone. “I’ll get breakfast started.”

Annie had to improvise all through her breakfast of banana pancakes, making up stories of how they’d spent their day, how they got lost just before dusk, and couldn’t find their way back to the trails she knew. Her father suggested that maybe she shouldn’t go up there any more. Annie managed not to panic, and replied that now that she knew the woods better than ever, it was safer than it had been before, and he dropped the idea.

On the bus to school the next day, Annie sat next to June and whispered that they needed to go up to the Haunted Woods that afternoon, she had a story to tell her.

“What about?” June whispered back.

“It’s too complicated,” Annie said. “I want to tell you there.” June looked unhappy about that, but she dropped the subject.

Mrs. Longsnout surprised them with a pop geography quiz that afternoon. Annie groaned to herself—another wonderful day ruined by the horror of geography. But to her surprise she not only knew every answer, it was easy. She finished the test in just a few minutes and looked up to see that everyone else was struggling and squirming in their seats.

Mrs. Longsnout looked back at her with wide eyes.

## Chapter 8: Know-It-All

“I don’t want you going back up into those woods,” Annie’s mother had said that morning.

“But Mom!”

“I mean it, Annie. You spend too much time up there. It’s too far away from home, and it’s a wilderness. There could be bears or coyotes up there.”

“I don’t think there’s been a bear around here for a hundred years,” her father said around a mouthful of toast.

“Raymond, please.”

“You’re right, I forgot about the zoo. Annie, don’t go up into the woods. One of the zoo’s lions or tigers might have escaped, too.”

“You don’t think it’s dangerous?” her mother asked her father.

“Laura, she and Dennis spent an entire night up there, all alone, without any equipment, and they’re fine.”

“You can jaywalk twenty times without a scratch before a bus flattens you.”

“What are you saying? There are rogue buses up in the woods, too?”

They were always like that. Annie found it amusing, and just a little confusing, how much her parents liked to argue. They never, ever shouted, but sometimes her mother seemed to think her father was, well, a flake; and sometimes her father seemed to think her mother was, as he said, a worrywarthog.

After several minutes of back and forth, they hadn’t reached a decision on whether to allow Annie to go back to the Haunted Woods. Her mother stopped arguing and simply asked Annie to promise not to go back.

Annie had no choice. She lied.

\* \* \*

“What’s going on?” June said when they got off the bus.

“Wait,” Annie said. “Are you coming, Otto?”

Otto watched his own feet as he shuffled them. Then he stopped and looked up at the girls.

“My mom said not to go,” he said. “But I have to.”

“Okay,” Annie said. “Let’s meet at the end of the street.”

They were all together on their bikes ten minutes later, heading up toward the hill. Annie led the way into the woods. There were no strange noises, no sign at all of Jazzberry and Fidget. They walked past their usual meeting place to their favorite meadow without seeing any winged things other than birds and insects.

“Where are they?” June said.

“I guess they got in trouble,” Annie said.

“What are you talking about?”

Annie told them everything. The fairies and dragons were not magic, they were aliens who had been around for ages. Their spaceship was under the ground beneath them, guarded by a giant dragon. Dragons had two kinds of boys but only one kind of girl. And if Uncle Dennis’s partners insisted on digging up the hill, everyone in America could die.

Otto and June sat quietly for a minute. The first thing Otto could think of to say was, “If this hill is their spaceship, it must be huge! Like a mother ship!”

Annie and June frowned at him and he ducked his head sheepishly.

“What can we do?” June said.

“Uncle Dennis is going to try to talk his partners out of building the houses,” Annie said. “But if he can’t, we have to find some other way of saving the fairies.”

“And us, too,” Otto said.

“Yes, us too.”

“Maybe if we told them it was dangerous, they’d stop,” June said.

“If that would work, no one would smoke cigarettes,” Annie said.

“Oh, yeah.”

“We should show them the dragons,” Otto said. “The dragons are cool. Then they’d stop.”

“No, then they’d try to catch all the dragons for pets or zoos or something.”

Otto nodded and scowled at the idea of someone putting Fidget in a zoo.

“Uncle Dennis said they’re going to make a lot of money. We have to convince them that they won’t.”

“How are we going to do that?” June said.

“I don’t know,” Annie said. “Let’s think about it.”

They thought and talked and lay in the meadow grass looking up at the sky until the sun started getting low. But they didn’t think of anything—not even how to explain to their parents where they’d been all afternoon.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Longsnout asked Annie to stay behind at the recess. When the other kids had left the classroom, her teacher sat on her desk and pointed to a chair in the front row. Annie obeyed silently, wondering what she’d done wrong.

“Annie, I’ve graded the quiz you took the other day.” She reached behind her and picked up a sheet of paper.

“You’re not going to flunk me, are you Mrs. Longsnout?” Annie said.

“That depends on how you do on your final test next week. If you do as well as you did on this quiz, you’ll be fine.”

That was the first time anyone had praised her schoolwork except in English or math. Annie was confused.

“I passed the quiz?”

“You got a perfect score. Let me ask you a question, Annie. What’s the capital of Illinois?”

“Springfield.”

“What year did Illinois enter the Union?”

“1818.”

“What states are its neighbors?”

“Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Tennessee, Indiana, and Michigan, across Lake Michigan.”

Mrs. Longsnout thought for a second. “You listed them in counter-clockwise order.”

“Should I have done it alphabetically?”

Her teacher shook her head. “Let’s try something else. What’s the capital of Romania?”

“Bucharest.”

“What body of water lies on Romania’s eastern border?”

“The Black Sea.”

“What’s the latitude of Bucharest?”

Annie closed her eyes briefly. “It’s about halfway between forty-four and forty-five.”

“Have you been having any headaches lately, dear?”

“Huh?”

“Spots in front of your eyes, ringing in your ears, anything like that?” Annie just stared at her. “Okay, dear, run along outside.”

Annie did run. What was that all about?

June was waiting just outside the door. “What did she want?”

“She wanted to know the capital of Romania.”

“Where’s Romania?” June said.

\* \* \*

Annie walked into the woods alone that afternoon. June had a piano lesson. Otto’s mother had somehow found out where he’d been yesterday, and he was grounded for a month. Annie just hoped her parents wouldn’t hear about it, or she might be grounded, too.

Once again no one met her at the usual spot. She walked past it, through several meadows and into the dark, trackless part of the Haunted Woods, where she’d only been with Uncle Dennis, following the fairy council. She walked until she was completely lost, then she sat down under a thick hickory tree and waited.

It took a long time, but she was stubborn. She wasn’t going home again until her friends came out and told her what was going on.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Jazzberry and Fidget appeared. It was the first time she’d ever seen them flying side by side. Usually Fidget fell out of the sky like a fruit pit dropped by a monkey.

They landed on the ground beside her and made themselves comfortable—or Jazzberry did. Fidget immediately started trying to scratch an itch in the middle of his back, using an arm, a wing, a tree, until he finally reached it with his tail.

“Did you get in a lot of trouble?” Annie said.

“We’ll survive,” Jazzberry said.

“They didn’t quite take our skins off,” Fidget said.

“Your parents spanked you?”

“I was being metaphorical,” the dragon said. “What they do is worse than spanking.”

“What? What do they do?”

“Guilt and homework,” Jazzberry said.

“Lots of homework,” Fidget added. “And we had to sit still for long speeches—really still, and really long speeches—about our shortcomings.”

“That must have been the worst part for you,” Annie said. “Sitting still.”

“Impossible. Excruciating. Cruel and unusual punishment.”

“It’s not that unusual,” Jazzberry said. “Remember when we tried to teach that piglet how to fly?”

“Ouch. I forgot about that one.”

“What did you do to me?” Annie said.

Jazzberry and Fidget looked at each other silently. Annie waited.

“We felt responsible,” Jazzberry said at last, “because you were ignoring your schoolwork to help us. I was afraid you’d have to do third grade again. So I asked my mother to give you what you need to know.”

“Your mother?”

“Willowleaf, my mother. She taught you everything you’ll need for the next two years of school.”

“Willowleaf is your mother?” That was the blue-haired fairy from the other night. “She was nice to me.”

“She is nice,” Fidget said. “But she can be a really tough old— Oof.” Jazzberry had punched him just below the wing. “Sorry.”

“What did she do to me?”

“She induced new long-term memory patterns in your cortical hologram,” Fidget said.

“What?”

“A long time ago,” the fairy said, “we figured out how human brains record memories. It was part of our initial survey of this world. Now we can rearrange the patterns in your... in your memory so you can know new things without having to work to learn them.”

Annie thought about this. She imagined the north coast of Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt. She could see the shapes of the countries and how they fit together. She knew their capitals, how many people lived there, what religions they practiced, what the land was like. She was a geography expert.

“Are you sure she only gave me two years?” she said. “I think she goofed and gave me two hundred. It feels like I know everything about everyplace in the world.”

“Oops,” Fidget said.

They sat quietly for a while.

“What are we going to do about our problem?” Annie said.

“I think we need to see what Dennis comes up with,” Jazzberry said.

“Uncle Dennis,” Annie said. She leaned her head back against the tree and closed her eyes. She had a sudden and powerful urge to cry.

\* \* \*

“I don’t think I can stop them,” Uncle Dennis said on the phone. When he called just after dinner and asked to speak to Annie, her mother had handed her the phone with a strange expression on her face.

“What happened?” Annie said.

“I talked to both of my partners today. I told them I’ve decided it would be better to try to preserve the woods.”

“You didn’t tell them about...” Annie was aware of her mother hovering in the living room, probably listening. “About you know who, did you?”

“No, of course not. Mannie laughed, but he was pretty nice about it. He was willing to sell out for seventy-five percent of his share of the expected profit.”

“How much is that?” Annie said, trying to remember how much she had in her Miss Piggy bank.

“About five million dollars.”

Annie felt her dinner turn over in her stomach. “What about the other man?”

“Jonas *didn’t* laugh. He refused to even consider it. Then he threatened to sue me if I tried to obstruct the project. Then he had the security guards escort me out of the bank.”

“So there’s no chance?”

“I didn’t say that, Annie. I’ll keep trying. There are other things I can do, I think. And there’s always eco-terrorism.”

She had no idea what that meant, but not understanding him was normal. “Okay. Thanks, Uncle Dennis.”

She went into the living room and sat on the couch. Her father was reading a book, but her mother was standing looking out the window. She turned to Annie.

“What did your uncle want?”

“Probably wants to go hiking again,” her father said without looking up.

Annie didn’t want to say anything, but her mother was waiting for an answer and obviously wouldn’t just let it go. She thought back, trying to remember exactly what she’d said on the phone.

“Uncle Dennis lost his electronic calendar thingie when we were up in the woods. It must have fallen out of his pocket. He thought maybe he’d left it somewhere before we went hiking, but no one can find it. He’s going to have to buy another one.”

Her mother was giving her that look again. “He called you to tell you he’s going to have to buy another calendar?”

“I helped him look for it in the bushes, so I guess he thought I was worried. He was just letting me know what happened.”

“Uh huh.” She didn’t look convinced. “Well, are you going to do your homework now?”

“No homework tonight.”

That made her father look up from his book. “Mrs. Longsnout didn’t give you any homework? Is she sick?”

She always gave them homework. “I meant that I did it already.”

He squinted at her, nodded, and went back to his book. Her mother watched her for several minutes as Annie looked through the TV Guide.

“Can I watch a program about penguins?” Annie asked her mother. She nodded and finally turned away, looking back out the window. Annie was worried, because her mother looked worried.

The next day, Annie and June went up to the Haunted Woods after school. This time Jazzberry and Fidget met them at their usual place. They still acted subdued, but at least they weren’t invisible any more.

“Uncle Dennis may not be able to help us.”

“Then why did you bother bringing him up here?” Fidget said crossly. “I have a year’s worth of reports to write because of him.”

“I didn’t know his partners would be so mean,” Annie said. “The bank man threw him out of the bank.”

“Then we’re finished,” Jazzberry said gloomily, settling to the ground. June sat down next to her, looking ready to cry.

“Not yet,” Annie said. “I can’t convince them, and maybe Uncle Dennis can’t either, but maybe *you* can.”

“We’re not going to reveal ourselves to any more humans, especially adult humans,” Jazzberry said. “We can’t do it. We promised.”

“You won’t have to. But you do need to reveal something.”

Jazzberry fluttered off the ground. “Annie,” she said sternly. “What are you thinking?”

“I want to see your spaceship,” Annie said.

## Chapter 9: The Ship

It was another long slog through the woods. Annie almost asked why they didn't build trails before she realized the obvious: they could fly, and they didn't want humans back here.

They'd had to wait until Saturday. Jazzberry said it was impossible to get to the ship, see anything, and get back before dinnertime, and anyway she had to ask the council for permission. They told Annie to bring Uncle Dennis, so she called him from a pay phone at school the next day. Annie, June, and Dennis met at the foot of the hill and walked into the Haunted Woods together.

The day was warm and sunny, but little light filtered down through the high trees. Annie was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, but June's sleeveless blouse didn't protect her; her arms were already webbed with scratches.

Jazzberry stopped at the foot of a massive oak, the biggest tree Annie had ever seen. Even its rough, grayish bark looked ancient. She gave them a few minutes to catch their breath.

"This is the entrance," the fairy said. "Once we're inside, don't touch anything. Don't sing, don't touch the walls, and keep close to us."

"Why?" Annie said.

"Because if the guardian thinks you're endangering the ship," Fidget said, "or trying to steal something, he'll eat you."

"Eat me?"

"That would be very difficult to explain to your parents," Jazzberry said. "And we'd miss you. So be good, okay? June? Dennis?"

Everyone agreed to follow the rules. Without warning, part of the ground near the base of the tree sank down, revealing a steeply sloping tunnel that was tall enough for even Dennis to stand in. Jazzberry flew down and Fidget ushered the humans into the hole. They had gone only a few steps when the opening behind them closed again, leaving them in total darkness that lasted for just a second before a strong, steady light sprang up. It was Jazzberry glowing, her skin putting out enough light, even through her gown, to read by.

The floor was dirt that was occasionally loose, so those without wings had to steady each other. The constant slipping was exhausting, but each time one of them started to fall, the others managed to catch her. They came at last to a level section and Annie was amazed that no one had sprained an ankle, or worse.

The tunnel ran smooth and flat for a short while and ended in a rock wall. Jazzberry waited for everyone to group together before she spoke. In a high, clear voice she sang something that didn't sound like words, just pure music. The rock before them fell back somehow, and they followed the fairy into a smooth, well-lit, coral-colored corridor that smelled like lavender.

\* \* \*

The hallway was a tube, perfectly round and smooth, about ten feet in diameter, with no visible seams or openings. It was difficult to walk on the curved, rubbery surface. Obviously it was not designed for walking on, but flying through.

As they went farther in, the color shifted subtly, until the original coral had turned to a pink that deepened slowly toward red. They had gone what felt like a mile, past a long section where the corridor curved continuously to the right, when the tube stopped.

Jazzberry sang again, causing a doorway to iris open. They walked and flew into an enormous bubble, bigger even than the stadium in St. Louis where Annie's father had taken her to a baseball game. The roof stretched far above them, its bluish tinge making it impossible to tell how high. The entire gigantic space was filled with a jungle, so the far side was invisible.

The plants looked normal at first, but after a moment Annie realized that the colors were all wrong. They seemed to come in two types. Some of the leaves were shades of bluish-green, but just as many were dark plum. There were plants that looked a little like palm trees, maple trees, blueberry shrubs, and tall grasses. Some had flowers of white, blue, yellow, red, green, or rusty brown. Many of the plants were very short, many more were no taller than Annie, but a few trees brushed the ceiling high overhead.

"This is our conservatory," Jazzberry said.

"A botanical garden?" Dennis asked.

"Yes. Plants from our home worlds. There are separate, smaller gardens with plants from other worlds we've visited. We have four rooms of Earth plants, a desert, a tropical rain forest, a temperate forest and prairie, and a tundra."

"Are they all as big as this?"

Jazzberry laughed. "No, they're quite small, only a few acres each. But we have over four hundred small gardens, so we can't give them a lot of room."

"How big is this garden?" June said.

"About four square miles."

"And how big is the ship?" Dennis said.

"What do mean, its volume? It's bigger than the hill under the Haunted Woods. We dug down pretty far when we settled here."

"But how big?"

"It's an ellipsoid," Fidget said. "Like a flattened egg. About three miles long, two and a half wide, and a mile high."

"I thought it would be small," Annie said. "Like a school bus. Or the space shuttle."

"Well, it was designed to be home to two thousand of us for a mission lasting fifty thousand years. So it couldn't be small."

"Let's go on," Jazzberry said.

She led them through the jungle, on neat, wide pathways made of the same rubbery floor as the corridor. Annie was awe-struck at first as they passed all the strange, alien plants, but after a few minutes she lost her wonder. It was just a woods, after all, like the Haunted Woods, except these plants were from another planet. By the time they reached the far side of the conservatory, almost an hour later, she was tired and a little bored.

They left the jungle and entered a tube that smelled like jasmine, colored bright yellow that, as they walked, slowly faded toward white. Jazzberry stopped at a featureless point in the corridor and sang two notes. A doorway opened into another room, this one small enough that when everyone was inside it felt a little crowded.

"This is another kind of conservatory," Jazzberry said. "We've preserved hundreds of samples of every kind of life form we've ever encountered."

"Like a zoo?" Dennis said.

"Not exactly. More like a library."

"I don't understand."

“A DNA library. Other planets use different genetic schemes, of course, but whatever they use, it’s recorded here.”

“Can you show us?” Annie said.

Jazzberry floated a little higher and sang a short song. The wall across from the open doorway darkened and a complicated pattern of lights appeared. She sang another note and a three-dimensional picture of an Indian appeared beside the light show. He was wearing leather clothes and long hair that was tied back.

“This is the DNA pattern of one of the people who lived in this area when we first buried the ship.” She sang a note and another pattern of lights appeared beside a picture of an oak tree.

“This is the DNA of the tree that guards the entrance to the ship.” Another note, and a completely different arrangement of lights shone beside the picture of a— Annie looked closer. It looked like an upside-down lobster with thick legs coming out of its head. “This is one of the aliens you were asking about, Annie, from the last world we visited before we came to Earth.”

“You have the DNA of every species on Earth?” Dennis said.

“Not yet,” Fidget said, “but we’re still gathering samples. There are too many, and new ones are evolving all the time. But we have a lot of them, including some that don’t exist anymore anywhere outside this library.”

“You mean extinct animals?” June said.

“Yes.”

“Not dinosaurs?” Annie said, thinking of Otto. When he’d first met Fidget, he’d thought he was a dinosaur.

“We haven’t been here that long,” Jazzberry said. “But we have mastodons and a lot of other things that used to live here, before your ancestors wiped them out.”

“Can you bring them back to life?” Dennis said excitedly.

“We could,” the fairy said. “But there’s no reason to. We don’t interfere with what happens on Earth except to protect ourselves. It’s your planet. If you want to destroy its ecosystem, that’s your business.”

Annie looked at the weird alien lobster. Something was tickling inside her head, trying to get out.

\* \* \*

Another long walk, through greenish corridors that shifted to blue, took them to a dim room that Annie would have thought was large before she’d seen the conservatory. The wall to their right flickered, and Annie realized it was composed of hundreds of flat-panel TVs, or maybe one giant TV that could show hundreds of channels at once. Many of the channels showed the interior of the ship—empty corridors, the conservatory, dark rooms—but several showed the guardian tree and the woods around it. She had just caught a glimpse of their group on one of the channels when something moved in the gloom ahead of them. Before she could look up, June screamed.

It was a dragon, shaped something like Fidget, but enormous, like the dragons from fairy tales. The cute spikes and horns that sprouted here and there from Fidget’s body were exaggerated into killing weapons on the giant’s body. The ceiling here was high, but he still had to duck his head to move, and he was moving toward them.

Fidget flew forward and spoke in a strange voice that Annie had never heard him use before. His English voice sounded like a boy of her age, but his dragon voice—all clicks, hums, and low whistles—sounded much older, and she reminded herself that while Fidget looked and acted young, he was actually over three centuries old.

The giant dragon continued to lumber toward them as Fidget spoke, responding in the same language but in an even deeper voice. As he got closer he loomed over them, until Annie began to feel like an ant walking under an elephant.

“This is Claw,” Fidget said. “He’s the guardian on duty this shift.”

Claw dropped his head, which was bigger than Annie’s entire body, down to their level. The snout came closer and closer to her, and when it was almost touching her the dragon inhaled deeply, making her hair and clothes fly as if in a wind. Then the giant head turned and Claw examined her slowly with an eye the size of a dinner plate. When the head drew away, Annie realized that she was standing alone: Dennis and June had stepped back.

The giant took half a step and repeated the sniff and stare with the other two humans. Then he drew back and watched them silently.

“This is the control room,” Jazzberry said. “When the ship is running, there would be a dozen people working here, monitoring the automatic systems. For a long time, no one but the guardian has been in here.”

Claw spoke again in the strange mixture of rumbles and whistles. He sounded like a freight train starting up.

“He wants to know which is the little girl who volunteered to help us,” Fidget said.

Annie stepped forward nervously. “I guess that’s me.”

The guardian lowered his head again and stared at her for several seconds, then he turned away and walked slowly back the way he had come.

“How many of those did you say there are?” Dennis said.

“About a hundred,” Jazzberry said, “but only one is awake at a time. They do guard duty for a century or so, then they go back to sleep while another takes his turn. If your friends try to dig up this hill, Claw will awaken the others. When they detect a threat to the ship, they attack instantly, and it’s very, very hard to restrain them. I’m not sure how much damage they would do before we could stop them.”

“He’s very scary,” June said, “but do they breathe fire or something? What could a hundred dragons do against a whole army?”

“The battle would last only a few minutes,” Jazzberry said. “Enhanced admale dragons are smart, extremely strong, and horrifyingly dangerous. It’s not just their size. They have weapons that humans have never even imagined. It’s entirely possible they could sterilize the whole hemisphere before we could calm them down.”

The room was silent except for the muffled thumping of Claw’s retreat. Finally, Dennis said softly, “They’re not my friends. They’re business partners.”

“There’s more,” Jazzberry said. “The guardians have a last resort. They absolutely will not allow our ship to fall into the hands of a race that’s not ready for space travel yet.”

“You mean us,” Annie said.

“I’m sorry, but yes. It seems unlikely, but if your armies put up a reasonable fight, or if someone tries to use nuclear weapons against the guardians, they’ll blow up the ship.”

“That would kill you, wouldn’t it?” June said.

“We’d probably already be dead by then. Blowing up the ship wouldn’t just affect the American continents. It would most likely make the entire planet uninhabitable.”

“So,” Dennis said tiredly, “if they try to build those houses, humanity’s only hope for survival is to lose quickly against the guardians, without putting up a serious fight. Sacrifice a billion people so the rest can live.”

“I’m afraid so.”

Dennis sank to the floor and put his head on his knees. “I should have stayed out of real estate,” he moaned.

\* \* \*

No one spoke after that. Jazzberry led them to another set of corridors, a short-cut to the exit. When the hole beneath the oak tree closed behind them, Dennis started walking without waiting to be led. He was going the wrong way, of course, and Fidget had to steer him back.

It was a long, sad, quiet tramp through the woods to the places that were familiar to them. When they stood in the late afternoon sun in the middle of the quiet meadow that Annie knew so well, with butterflies stuttering from flower to flower and dragonflies zooming past on their inscrutable errands, Jazzberry and Fidget stopped.

“Dennis,” the fairy said, “listen to me. This isn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known what lay beneath this hill. And think about this. Suppose you *had* stayed out of it, and your partners found someone else. Then we never would have contacted Annie, and there’d be no hope at all. We still have over a week to figure something out.”

“Nine days,” Dennis said, and he turned and walked down the hill alone.

“I’ll think of something,” Annie said.

“I know you will, dear,” Jazzberry said, and that was how Annie learned that fairies could lie.

## Chapter 10: Freak

“Is there something you want to tell us, dear?” Annie’s mother said at breakfast the next morning. It was Sunday. Annie had finished her strawberry waffles but wouldn’t touch the sausage links, which used to be her favorite. It was hard not to eat them—they smelled so good—but she remembered that adult fairies never ate meat.

Was it the sausages? Or had they found out about her going to the woods every day when she’d promised not to? Or was it something else?

“Yes,” Annie said. She folded her napkin and put it beside her plate. “I’ve decided to become a vegetarian. That’s why I didn’t eat the sausages.”

Her parents looked confused. So that wasn’t it.

“I mean about school, honey,” her mother said.

“Mrs. Longsnout called us,” her father said.

She called them because Annie *passed* a geography test? There was no way to win. Get in trouble if you flunk, get in trouble if you pass.

They waited, but she didn’t respond. Finally, her father said, “What’s the capital of Azerbaijan?”

“Baku.”

“What’s its population?”

“The city or the country?”

Her parents looked at each other. “Never mind. What’s the capital of Cameroon?”

“Yaoundé.”

Her mother leaned forward. “Dear, are you feeling all right? Have you had any headaches or blurry vision?”

“No. Why?”

“Honey,” her father said, “a week ago you hated geography and couldn’t make yourself study it. You flunked half your tests. Now you seem to know everything about it. That’s not normal.”

“I decided it was interesting,” Annie said. “I read a book.”

“What book?”

“Sweetie,” her mother interrupted, “Mrs. Longsnout thinks you might be sick.”

“Sick?”

“A brain t—. Something wrong with your head.”

“She thinks I’m crazy?”

Her father snorted and her mother frowned at him. “It’s Mrs. Longsnout who’s crazy,” her father said. “Wouldn’t Annie have told us if she didn’t feel well? Something weird is going on, but look at her. She’s perfectly healthy.”

“Annie, you can go play now,” her mother said.

Annie got up quickly and went to her room. She knew her parents were about to have one of their discussions, and she didn’t want to be there for it. Especially since it was about her and her brain. And especially because she only had eight days left to think of a way to save the world.

\* \* \*

After school let out Monday, Annie and June were walking to the bus when Trevor Bridges, the bully, stepped in front of them.

“I heard you’re a real brain now, freak,” he said. “What happened, did your dad pump some gunk into your ears to fill up your empty head?”

His hyenas thought that was hilarious. They slapped each other on the back and made dopey faces at her.

“Remove thyself from our presence, varlet,” Annie said, “or I’ll thrash thee within a hair of thy life.”

“Huh?”

“She said, get lost,” June said.

Trevor pushed June so hard that she fell to the ground, spilling her books. Papers flew in the air like butterflies in Jazzberry’s meadow. Annie looked at Trevor and his idiot followers laughing and felt something snap inside.

She dropped her own books and took a step toward the bully. He stopped laughing, but a smirk creased his fleshy face. He raised his fists.

“I owe you one, Rusty,” he said, and he threw a slow, clumsy punch.

Annie knocked his fist aside with the back of her hand, turned into him so her back was toward him, grabbed his outstretched arm, and ducked. Trevor went flying and landed in a heap beside Annie’s books.

“Now we’re even,” she said.

She helped June up and started collecting her papers. The circle of kids that had formed around them gasped, warning her to step quickly to one side. Trevor went charging past her and crashed into the onlookers, falling down and taking three of them with him. Annie handed June the papers she’d picked up and turned to face Trevor, who was picking himself up. His face was all red.

“Toro,” Annie said, waving an imaginary bullfighter’s cape.

He charged again. She whirled out of the way and hit him hard and high in the back as he went by, sending him sprawling. He wasn’t so quick to get up this time. She calmly picked up her things and took June’s arm, and they walked through the crowd to get on the bus.

“When did you learn kung fu?” June whispered when they were settled.

“I need to have a serious talk with Jazzberry,” Annie said. “I think Willowleaf may have given me more than geography.”

\* \* \*

Her parents kept her home from school the next day. Her father went to work as usual, but her mother stayed home with her, working in the garden until noon. She said nothing about the fight, and asked no more geography questions. After a quiet lunch together, she told Annie to get in the car.

“Where are we going?” Annie said.

“To the doctor’s.”

“To get a shot?” she said nervously. She hated needles.

“No, dear, she’s just going to examine you.”

They had to wait a long time at the doctor’s office. Annie kept picking up magazines from the table beside her. Her mother would look up from her own book several minutes later, see what Annie was reading—People, Redbook, Ladies Home Journal—and quietly take it away. Then Annie would find another one and they’d do it again. Annie would have preferred something more interesting to read, but vexing her mother at least passed the time.

A nurse took them to a small, ugly room. The walls were the color of Silly Putty, and the ominous metal bed was covered with a sheet of thin paper. After a moment, the doctor came in, a woman a few years older than Annie's mother. The two of them went out into the hall together, leaving Annie sitting on a chair in the room.

She didn't stay there long. With her ear pressed against the door, she could hear almost everything.

"Well, something's wrong. All of a sudden she knows things no child could know, things that I don't know. She's been distracted and furtive for weeks. She's always stealing away to her woods. And yesterday after school she beat up a bully twice her size, and came home without a scratch."

"Any number of things could explain all of that," the doctor said.

"Like what? A brain tumor?"

"Oh, I doubt that. What makes you think she's ill? Has she had any headaches, blurred vision, seeing spots, muscle spasms? Anything like that?"

"No. But I know something's wrong."

"Well, let's take a look."

Annie scurried back to her chair.

The doctor was friendly as she did the usual doctor things: made Annie stick out her tongue, listened to her heart with the stethoscope, checked her blood pressure, looked into her eyes, ears, and nostrils, thumped her back, hit her knees with the little rubber hammer. Then she told Annie to walk up and down the hallway outside the room, wave her arms in a funny way, touch her nose with alternate hands, and do lots of other stupid stuff. She asked her questions about spots, ringing in her ears, and a dozen other things.

"You're perfectly fine, Annie," the doctor said at last.

"But—" her mother said.

"I can do a blood test if you want, but it's expensive and I don't think it's necessary. She has no motor impairments, no vision or hearing problems, nothing wrong with her balance or coordination. There's been no pain, no symptoms at all that I can see. She's perfectly healthy."

"What about a CAT scan?"

"*Very* expensive, and definitely uncalled for."

Annie thought her mother looked disappointed. Did she want her to be sick?

They went home, and Annie spent the afternoon in the backyard, swinging, looking at the neighbor's trees, and trying to think of something to do about Jazzberry and Fidget.

After a quiet and tense dinner that night, her father was reading the paper while Annie and her mother watched TV. Suddenly he laughed and crumpled the pages in his hands.

"What's funny?" her mother said, but not as if she really wanted to know.

"You know that drilling rig they're building in Alaska?" Her mother grunted. "They had to stop work on it because they found a rare kind of fox. Apparently, the construction guys were taking a coffee break and this strange little animal just wandered into the camp."

"What happened?" her mother said.

"It's Alaska: what do you think happened? Somebody shot it. But when they showed it to some professor who was up there consulting for the government, he got all excited. It's supposed to be extinct, I guess. So they have to stop while they survey the place again to make sure there are no more around. It'll set them back weeks, maybe a month."

"Good," her mother said listlessly, and turned back to the TV.

Annie didn't see any more of the show they were watching. Something was tickling inside her head again, trying to get out.

\* \* \*

"What did you do to her?" June said.

"I already told you," Jazzberry said, "my mother just gave her new memories."

"You should have seen her." June lashed out with clumsy karate chops. "Lethal ballerina!"

"Maybe she slipped in a few other things. I thought she was just going to give her geography."

"Well," Annie said, "it looks like I'm going to graduate this year, so thank you. But I think my mom's going to drag me to every doctor in town until she finds one who agrees that I'm sick."

Annie and June lay back in the fragrant grass and looked up at the clouds floating by. Annie had her left knee up; Jazzberry sat on it, nervously grooming her wings with her forearms. They were all getting more tense every day.

"Want to play with Weasel?" Fidget asked June. He pulled his pet mouse out of his ear.

"No thanks," June said. "I'm not really into mice."

Annie glanced over. She thought June's real problem with Weasel was that he lived in somebody's ear. It was kind of gross.

"Hey," she said, "what's wrong with your mouse, anyway? Why does he have all that weird hair behind his ears?"

Most mice Annie had seen were sleek. Fidget's mouse had tufts of fur growing straight up behind both ears, and at the tip of his tail, too.

"There's nothing wrong with him," Fidget said stiffly. "That's normal for our pet mice."

"What do you mean, *your* pet mice?"

"My family's been keeping mice like Weasel ever since we came to this continent. We landed in Australia first, you know. They have some really weird mice down there. Well, they used to, I mean."

Annie sat up. Jazzberry steadied herself on her knee.

"Fidget, I've never seen a mouse like Weasel before."

"That's because they went extinct in the wild a long time ago. But we still raise them for pets. They're much calmer than your modern mice. And they don't mind living in your ear."

"Your mouse is extinct?"

"No, they're just extinct in the wild. Like cockatoos and a lot of other zoo species will be soon."

Annie's head was spinning. All those little head tickles were ganging up on her, making her feel dizzy.

"What's wrong, Annie?" June said.

Annie held up her hand to forestall any more questions and closed her eyes. Suddenly everything came together.

"I know how to stop the construction," she said.

Everyone was talking at once, "What?", "How?", and "Tell us" all jumbled together.

"Fidget," Annie said, "can you get me a mouse like Weasel?"

"Sure," he said. He scratched the bottoms of his feet with the side of his tail. "But I'm not sure I'd be allowed to."

"What if it's the only way to save ourselves?"

“Then we’ll bend the rules,” Jazzberry said. “What are you thinking?”  
She told them. It only took a moment. When she was done, no one spoke for a long time.  
Then Fidget said to Jazzberry, “I told you she could do it.”

## Chapter 11: Extinct

On Thursday afternoon, four days before the world would begin to end, Annie raced from school to the Haunted Woods. Fidget handed her a tufted mouse just like Weasel. She didn't stop to talk, she just ran back down the hill and rode her bike as fast as she could to Uncle Dennis's house, with the mouse clinging to her shoulder, its long fluff-tipped tail whipping in the wind.

She put the mouse in her pants pocket and rang the doorbell. Aunt Helen answered the door with her vicious poodle in her arms.

"I suppose you've come to see Dennis again," she said. The dog snapped at Annie.

"Yes, please."

"You never come over and bake cookies with me anymore, dear."

As far as Annie could remember, she had never baked cookies with Aunt Helen, but she smiled and followed her aunt into Uncle Dennis's office. He was standing by his desk, studying something.

"Ah, Annie," he said. "Look at this."

She went to stand beside him. On his desk lay a survey map of the Haunted Woods with large, scrawled notes handwritten in red magic marker all over it. They said things like, "spike trees," "sugar in gas tanks," "stand down bulldozers," and "TNT."

"What is this?" she said.

"My plan of attack. We'll be a combination of Gandhi, Tiananmen Square, the Monkey Wrench Gang, and Rambo."

"Uncle Dennis, I have something really important to show you."

"Okay." He rolled up the map and sat down. "Is it a bomb?"

"Bomb? No, it's a mouse."

She took the little creature out of her pocket and set it on Dennis's desk. It peered around for a moment, then sat on its back legs and incuriously started washing its face with its paws.

"Does it explode?"

Annie shut the office door and sat down in a chair facing him. "Uncle Dennis, please don't go nuts on me. I need your help."

"I'm not crazy, Annie. There's no other way. We have to stop them."

"I know how to stop them."

"So do I. Civil disobedience, sabotage, and high explosives."

"No, that mouse will stop them."

Uncle Dennis poked at the cute, furry thing. It batted at his finger once and then rolled up and went to sleep. "Annie, this mouse couldn't stop a pea from rolling off the table."

"That mouse has been extinct for thousands of years."

He squinted at it. "Looks fine to me."

She sighed. "Did you read about the oil rig in Alaska?"

"The one that got stopped by a fox? Wait a minute, you're not thinking of trying that with this little mouse, are you?"

"The mouse is just the beginning. We can get other extinct animals, too. Remember the DNA library in the ship?"

He jumped up and paced back and forth for a minute, then fell back into his chair. “Won’t work. We need to stop them by Monday. How many extinct species can they have ready by then?”

“I don’t know,” Annie said. “But we’ve got to try, and we’ve got to do it *now*. Do you know anyone at the university?”

“Sure, a bunch of guys.”

Annie described the rest of her idea. He was on the phone before she left the room.

\* \* \*

She rode back up to the woods and collapsed in their meadow, panting for breath.

“How fast can you make extinct animals?” she asked Jazzberry and Fidget.

“We can accelerate gestation quite a lot,” Fidget said. “And with some species we can keep them in the tanks until well after they’d ordinarily be born. I’d say we could get some six month old animals in about two weeks.”

“But we only have four days!”

“We don’t need to do them all at once,” Jazzberry said. “We just need a few by tomorrow, several more next week, and the rest we can dribble out over the next few months.”

“What can you do by tomorrow?”

“Let’s see,” Fidget said. “I’ve got a big armadillo, a short-faced skunk, and a bunch of voles.”

What was a vole? She decided not to ask. “And then what?”

“Things you wouldn’t believe,” Fidget said, and he grinned a big, toothy dragon smile.

\* \* \*

Annie was doodling in her notebook during geography class. She was bored again, not because she hated the subject, but because she knew it so well. Part of her mind was listening for Mrs. Longsnout to make a mistake—she caught one every couple of days, now—but mostly she was wondering what was happening with her uncle.

Someone knocked at the classroom door. Mrs. Longsnout looked up from her notes about the Mediterranean Sea. The principal was outside, gesturing to her.

“Excuse me, class,” she said. When she came back a moment later, she asked Annie to gather her things.

“What’s up?” June whispered from the seat in front of her.

“Maybe Uncle Dennis?” Annie said.

He was waiting for her in the office. “We need to go up there,” he said. They walked out together. “These people are paranoid. They wouldn’t believe I was your uncle. I had to call your mom and get her to release you, and she wasn’t very happy with me, I can tell you that.”

“What did you tell her?” Annie said as she got into his car.

“I told her something critical was happening in the woods and I needed your help. Life and death. I think she thinks we’re just playing hooky.” He pulled out into traffic. “Oh, by the way, this is Professor Exworthy.”

Annie looked in the back seat and yelped in surprise. She hadn’t seen the big, bearded man slumped in the back seat.

“Joe, this is my niece, Annie. She found the mouse.”

The professor leaned forward and shook her hand awkwardly between the seats. “Nice to meet you, miss,” he said. His voice was very soft, as if he were half asleep.

Dennis parked the car at the end of the road. “We have to walk from here,” he said.

The professor took off his ratty coat and wide tie and tossed them into the car. Annie led them up the trail into the woods.

“Nothing special about this place,” he muttered as they went. “Typical oak-hickory forest, subclimax, probably logged about fifty years ago. You ever see any quail or pheasant up here, little miss?”

“No, sir, but I have seen some strange things.”

“I think Canada geese are about the strangest thing you could find in a small plot like this. There used to be bison in these woods, and wolf, bear, cougar, elk, all the standard North American Holocene fauna. Gone now.”

They walked the rest of the way to the meadow in silence, except for a running mumbled commentary from the professor.

Annie wasn't sure what to expect. Fidget hadn't been specific about what time the new—well, old—animals would be ready, and they hadn't worked out exactly how they would handle whoever it was Dennis would come up with. So she had to play it by ear.

“This is the meadow where I found the mouse,” she said. “It wasn't shy, it let me pick it right up.”

“Good thing there are no more cougar up here, little miss,” Professor Exworthy said. “They might let you pick them up, too...”

His voice ran out. He had been walking slowly across the meadow, kicking idly at the grasses, but now he had stopped and was staring at the ground.

“What is it?” Dennis said.

“I'm not sure. *Pliophenacomys*, maybe.”

“Pliowhat?” Annie said.

“A vole. An extinct vole.”

Annie walked up beside him and looked at the ground. Scurrying around in the grass and flowers were half a dozen mouse-sized things that looked like miniature gerbils. She looked up and saw Jazzberry wave at her from a shrub just ahead, point at the ground, and vanish.

“What's this over here?” Annie said, leading the way to the bush.

“Oh, my god!” the professor yelled.

“What? What is it?” Dennis said.

“*Holmesina septentrionalis*. I don't believe it. The youngest fossil is almost ten thousand years old, from Florida. How can this be?” He squatted on his haunches. “It's a young one.”

Annie looked down at the weird armadillo. Its back was covered in three separate, heavy bands of armor like a turtle's shell. It was bigger than Aunt Helen's poodle, bigger than Fidget. How had they grown this in one day?

“These can get to be six feet long.”

“A six-foot armadillo?” Dennis said. “Come on.”

“I'm serious. Lots of Pleistocene fauna grew to be larger than today's creatures. We live in an impoverished world, Dennis, and we think it's normal.”

“Look out,” Annie said. “Skunk!”

A small skunk had waddled into the clearing. Its coat was black with lightning-shaped stripes. Something was wrong with its face; its muzzle was pushed in, almost like a Persian cat.

The professor moved forward just as Annie and Dennis were backing up. “*Brachyprotoma*,” he whispered. “This can't be happening.”

“Maybe you should take some pictures, Joe,” Dennis said.

“Yes, of course. What’s wrong with me?” He unslung an expensive-looking camera from his back and took lots of pictures of all three strange animals.

“Is that enough to convince you?” Dennis said. “You’ve got four samples of extinct Pleistocene fauna, all found in one small spot. Think of what else you might find in these woods.”

“The development has got to be stopped,” the professor said. “I know who to call.”

“Let’s get to it, then.”

“In a minute, Dennis. In a minute.” He stood over the armadillo, smiling as he watched it chew on the bark of the shrub.

\* \* \*

“What’s going on, young lady?” her father asked her.

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“Dennis pulls you out of school in the middle of the day to go romping through the woods —”

“Raymond,” her mother said.

“In a minute, dear, I’m—”

“Raymond. Look.”

The TV was showing the news. Annie and her father turned to see Dennis and the professor surrounded by a forest of microphones.

“We’ve spoken to a federal judge,” Professor Exworthy said. “He’s agreed to grant an injunction to halt the development until we can assess the fauna more thoroughly. In my opinion, the environmental impact assessment was grossly inadequate. There may be an investigation in that area.”

“Mr. Rust!” one of the reporters shouted. “You’re one of the partners in this development. Why would you want to stop it?”

“If these really are unique organisms, we have to protect them,” Dennis said. “I just want to do the right thing.”

Her mother turned off the TV. Both of her parents turned to look at her.

Annie shrugged. “I found a mouse,” she said.

\* \* \*

The houses were stopped, for a few months at least, and maybe forever. Like the little fox in Alaska, the little mouse in Leftover had forced the bulldozers to shut down until the government could decide whether there were really special animals there that had to be protected.

The TV people didn’t come until the weekend. Annie never learned how they found out that she was the discoverer of the first strange creature. The only people who knew the truth were Otto, June, and Uncle Dennis, and she doubted that any of them would tell anybody. Perhaps the professor had mentioned the little miss who took him up the hill.

Sunday morning the doorbell rang as Annie was getting dressed. Her mother went to answer it and immediately slammed it shut on the chaos and shouting.

“Raymond!” she screamed.

Her father was great. He let the reporters inside, but then he made them promise not to scare his daughter. When one of them shouted at her out of turn, her father stormed over, grabbed the man’s coat, and hustled him out the door before he knew what was happening. After that everyone was very polite.

Annie sat on the couch, answering questions about the Haunted Woods—the reporters loved that name. She described the time she and her Uncle Dennis had been lost there overnight.

“Did you see any strange animals that night?” a young woman asked her. “Any giant cave bears or mastodons? Any dinosaurs?”

She said no, she had never seen anything but small, strange creatures in the meadow. And there were a lot of butterflies up there. The woods were dark and kind of scary.

“What do you call that mouse you found?” someone asked.

Annie thought for a second. “I call him Weasel Junior,” she said.

## Chapter 12: Safety

The National Guard was called in to patrol the edges of the Haunted Woods to keep out reporters, vandals, and the merely curious. This meant that Annie could no longer go up to visit her friends, and as a result she had much more time for studying. She passed all of her tests, getting a perfect score on her English and geography exams, and so she was finished with third grade forever. It had been a tough year.

“It’ll be weird to be a fourth grader,” she told June. They were sitting on the swings in Annie’s yard, pushing themselves back and forth with their feet and twisting the chains.

“You’ll get used to it. And next year you won’t have any trouble with geography.”

“I don’t think I’d have any trouble with geography if I was in college.”

“Do you...”

“What?” Annie said.

“Do you think Willowleaf would zap my brain with science?”

Annie laughed. “Ask Jazzberry. She might.”

As time went on, scientists found more and more strange animals in the Haunted Woods. No one could explain why all the animals they found were quite young, or why none of them had ever been seen before. Every few days there was another report of a new species discovered.

The bestiary came to include a ground sloth that when adult would be the size of an ox; a beaver the size of a black bear; a capybara half again as big as the ones in South America; a peccary with a strange, flat head; a camel that would grow to be ten feet tall; and—this excited the TV people the most—a mastodont, a heavily-built elephant with curving tusks.

All of these animals had lived in Illinois once, and none of them had been seen by humans for over ten thousand years. Some of them had died out before humans ever set foot on the continent.

It took only weeks for the federal government to declare the hill the Haunted Woods National Monument. The Army was brought in to build a high wall around it, to contain the animals—which had now started wandering into the town of Leftover—and to keep out everyone but scientists and guided tourists.

Dennis and his partners were compensated fairly for the land’s value as a housing development, which made them very wealthy. The bank president, Jonas Miller, claimed that the government had ripped him off, but Mannie, Dennis’s other partner, went on TV to say that the buyout was fair and he was happy to do his patriotic duty to help preserve rare and exotic Illinois wildlife. The townspeople decided that Jonas was just greedy and took their money out of his bank. After he was fired and moved out of town, many of them went back.

Annie didn’t see Jazzberry and Fidget for over three weeks.

\* \* \*

The moon was shining in through the rustling curtains of Annie’s bedroom. She was supposed to be asleep, but she couldn’t stop thinking about fairies and dragons.

She realized suddenly that someone was in her room. She looked down from the ceiling to see them sitting on the foot of her bed.

“Jazzberry! Fidget! I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Come on,” Fidget said, rubbing his left ear with his hind foot. “You don’t think we’d abandon the girl who saved the world, do you?”

“We knew you were busy,” Jazzberry said, “and the council asked us to wait a while before coming to see you again.”

“Everyone’s been hyper lately,” Fidget said. “Pointing cameras everywhere. You’d think they’d never seen a stag moose before.”

“How have you been?” Annie said.

“Busy,” the dragon said. Now he was scratching his other ear. “They changed my punishment to managing the release of new animals. I wanted to let some carnivores out. We’ve got some great ones, but you wouldn’t believe how loudly a dragon can yell ‘No!’”

“I guess I can’t come see you in our meadow anymore,” Annie said.

“No, but we can visit you. And there are other quiet, sunny places we can meet.”

“It’s time to go,” Jazzberry said.

“You’re leaving already? You just got here!”

“You’re coming with us,” the fairy said.

“Huh?”

“It’s a surprise,” Fidget said. “Get dressed.” She changed quickly into jeans and a T-shirt. Fidget flew behind her and wrapped all four legs around her. “Here we go,” he said.

They sailed out of the window, over the dark houses, and right into the window of June’s bedroom.

“Wake up,” Annie whispered.

“Ahh!” June said. “Annie, what are you— Fidget! Jazzberry!”

“Get dressed,” Annie told her.

“We’ve got a surprise for you,” Fidget said.

When June was ready, Jazzberry told them to hold hands and stand close together.

“But you can’t carry two of us,” Annie said.

“I’ve been practicing,” Fidget replied, and all four of them sailed out the window.

This time Annie recognized the landmarks by moonlight: the Mississippi delta, Gulf of Mexico, Panama canal, Yucatán peninsula, Galápagos Islands, Andes mountains, Tierra del Fuego—and Antarctica.

It was dark but then Fidget did his trick to make it look like day. They could see vast fields of ice, and towering cliffs of the stuff plummeting down into the frothy water. A few icebergs floated below them, serene and immovable. Fidget swooped lower, until they could spot cracks and fissures in the snow fields. They whisked around mountains, flew directly over the South Pole, and finally hovered over a wide, white plain that gleamed in the silver light.

There were figures below them, hordes and crowds of waddling, honking, jostling, squealing, fighting, sliding, playing, comical birds.

“It’s like a dream!” Annie yelled. Her laughter rang off the ice below and was echoed by the happy hooting of the penguins.

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## **About the Author**

Chris Mason is a software engineer who would rather have been a writer. He worked in the corporate world for 18 years, including ten years at Microsoft. After leaving Microsoft for good he founded GrowlyBird Software, which develops free applications for Macintosh users.

*Jazzberry and Fidget* is his third novel. More novels, all completely different, are available as ebooks on [obooko.com](http://obooko.com)