

SCARLETT THOMAS

- THE -
CHOSEN
ONES

WORLD  QUAKE

1

Orwell Bookend was not a very happy man. At this moment, with a small bat peering at him with its peculiar upside-down eyes, he wasn't sure if he'd ever been happy. Perhaps he had been happy once, a long time ago, when his first wife Aurelia had still been around. Before his daughter Effie had got so out-of-control. And before he had climbed into this dusty attic without changing out of his work suit.

Where was that blasted child? Probably out dabbling in 'magic' somewhere with her deluded friends – that fat, bespectacled boy, and the girl who seemed to wear nightdresses all the time. Well, Effie would certainly be in trouble when she got home. She must have been up here in the attic, Orwell concluded, and taken the book already. *The Chosen Ones* by Laurel Wilde was nowhere to be found. Which was the main thing currently making him extremely unhappy.

Orwell Bookend's unhappiness had started, like much unhappiness, when the prospect of happiness had been dangled

in front of him and then cruelly snatched away. This had happened approximately forty-five minutes earlier. He had been listening to the radio in the car on his way home from the university when a competition had been announced.

Orwell Bookend loved competitions. He didn't admit this to most people, but they even made him happy. Well, until he lost. Every Friday he carefully filled in the prize cryptic crossword from the *Old Town Gazette* and sent it off to a PO Box address in the Borders. The cost of the stamps over the years had far exceeded the value of the prize, which was a fifteen-pound book token, but Orwell would not rest until he had that book token, which he planned to have framed and put up in his office.

The second thing that made Orwell Bookend happy was acquiring money, even though he wasn't very good at it (as demonstrated by the business with the book token). If he could only find the book – the hardback first-edition of *The Chosen Ones* that Aurelia had bought for Effie all those years ago – then he would have the chance to enter a competition *and* make money. That was what it had said on the radio. Anyone lucky enough to own an original copy of *The Chosen Ones* was to take it to the Town Hall on Friday, where they would be given fifty pounds in cash and a chance to win unlimited free electricity for life. And anyone with a paperback edition of the book could swap it for a tenner.

Fifty pounds had become rather a lot of money since the worldquake had happened five years before. After the worldquake, the economy, like many other complex systems, had become tired and sulky and had started to misbehave. It certainly no

longer had any interest in following a lot of silly mathematical rules. Today fifty pounds was definitely worth having, although who knew about tomorrow?

But unlimited free electricity for life! Now that really was a prize worth winning. After all, no one, no matter how rich, had access to unlimited electricity, not since the worldquake. Well, no one apart from Albion Freake, the man who happened to own all the electricity in the world. For some reason his company, Albion Freake Inc., was giving away this huge prize, and putting up all the cash too. All Orwell Bookend had to do was find the book. Of course, it wasn't really his book. It was Effie's. But that didn't bother Orwell Bookend in the slightest.



Dr Green's head looked like a boiled potato. Not a nice, normal boiled potato that had been rinsed and peeled before cooking, but an old, dry potato with leathery skin that had been left in the ground too long and, despite having been boiled, still had strange clumps of hair sprouting from it. To Maximilian Underwood these clumps looked like roots that had bravely ventured into the light and then promptly died.

Dr Green was in the middle of an educational story – the worst kind of story, in Maximilian's opinion – in which a poor little impoverished child has been given a pair of battered old running shoes by a mysterious hunchbacked crone in a food bank.

'The old lady whispers to the child that the shoes are magic,' said Dr Green, in a voice that was sort of soft and wet and greasy,

like margarine. Maximilian knew exactly what was going to happen in the story. *Everyone*, surely, knew what would happen in the story. The next day the child puts on the shoes and wins a race with the fastest time ever recorded. Then she gets discovered by a famous sports coach, who implores her to wear better running shoes. Of course, she refuses to wear anything but her tattered-looking 'magic' shoes. Eventually, the inevitable happens. The girl's rival steals the shoes and hides them. The girl is forced to compete in normal shoes. And of course she still wins. Moral: it was never about the shoes. The end.

'Now,' said Dr Green, once he had finished telling the story. 'Some points to ponder.'

He walked over to a blackboard-on-wheels that lived in a cupboard for the rest of the week and only came out on a Monday night for these classes, which were supposed to be for Neophytes – newly epiphanised people, mainly children – to learn the basics of magic. This was Maximilian's first class. He had hoped for bubbling cauldrons at the very least, and ideally things flying around the room and catching fire. But no. It was all very boring.

On the blackboard was a list of things that were forbidden for Neophytes, which had been the subject of most of the class so far.

1. NEOPHYTES MUST NEVER DO MAGIC WITHOUT SUPERVISION OF AN ADEPT (OR HIGHER).
2. NEOPHYTES ARE FORBIDDEN FROM OWNING A BOON WITHOUT THE EXPRESS PERMISSION OF THE GUILD OF CRAFTSPEOPLE (WHICH CAN BE REVOKED AT ANY TIME).

3. ANY NEOPHYTE WHO BRINGS A BOON TO CLASS WILL HAVE IT CONFISCATED.
4. NEOPHYTES ARE FORBIDDEN FROM DISCUSSING MAGIC OUTSIDE OF THIS CLASSROOM.
5. ANY NEOPHYTE WHO TRAVELS, OR ATTEMPTS TO TRAVEL, TO THE OTHERWORLD WILL BE VERY SEVERELY PENALISED.
6. NEOPHYTES ARE FORBIDDEN FROM EXCHANGING ANY BOONS, MAPS, SPELLS, INFORMATION OR KNOWLEDGE OF ANY KIND RELATING TO MAGIC OR THE OTHERWORLD.
7. NEOPHYTES MUST NEVER MENTION THE OTHERWORLD AT ANY TIME TO ANY PERSON.
8. NEOPHYTES MUST ONLY SPEAK ENGLISH AND NEVER ANY OTHERWORLD LANGUAGES. SPEAKING OTHERWORLD LANGUAGES IN THE REALWORLD CARRIES A VERY SEVERE PENALTY.

It was even worse than normal school. And it was colder, too. Dr Green's weekly class was held in a very dusty old church hall with a wooden floor and huge enamelled white radiators that made constant creaking and groaning sounds but never emitted any heat. Each radiator had a china teacup underneath it to catch the drips. There was an old fluorescent light that flickered dimly during the short periods the electricity was on. But the room was mainly lit with candle-lamps.

Maximilian looked at the list again. It just so happened that he had already done most of the forbidden things on it, and he didn't care one little bit.

His friend Effie Truelove had pretty much done all of them, too. She'd certainly been to the Otherworld. Maximilian felt

faintly proud that he himself had done some things that weren't even on the list, like attempting to travel to the Underworld and reading someone else's mind.

Still, it was lucky that Lexy Bottle had warned Maximilian and Effie not to bring their boons to class. Apparently, if Dr Green took your boons away you never saw them again. Maximilian's boons – the Spectacles of Knowledge, and the Athame of Stealth – were at this moment hidden safely under his bed at home. He'd used a minor cloaking spell to hide the athame from his mother, in case she randomly decided, as she sometimes did, to tidy his bedroom. His mother knew he had epiphanised and was a scholar, of course, but he hadn't yet owned up to the fact that he was also a mage. He wasn't sure his mother would like that.

Outside the classroom a barn owl hooted and a gentle frost started to spread itself quietly in hollows and on the high moors. Deep in the black sky a meteor fizzed and then died. It was getting late. All the candles in the room seemed to flicker and dance as one. At this moment all Maximilian wanted was his bedtime snack – three coffee creams and a glass of goat's milk – and then a lovely, long, peaceful . . .

Lexy nudged Maximilian. 'Wake up,' she hissed.

On Lexy's other side, Effie Truelove was dropping off too. What was wrong with them both? This class was the very most exciting thing Lexy Bottle had ever experienced. Lexy was going to learn how to be a great healer. She was going to find someone to take her on as an Apprentice, and then she was going to be . . .

‘First of all,’ said Dr Green, ‘I want you to think about how magic works in the story. I want you to identify *where* the magic is in the story. Or even if there *is* magic in the story. Then I want you to list *all* the instances where possible exchanges of M-currency are happening at *each* relevant point of the story.’

Lexy had already turned the page in her new notebook and written the date and the tasks with her new ink pen. She was sure she already knew all the answers. But before the children could get started, the church bell struck nine, which meant it was time for everyone to go home. So soon! Lexy could happily have spent all night soaking up Dr Green’s wisdom.

‘You can complete the task for homework,’ said Dr Green, ‘to be handed in at the beginning of the class next Monday at seven o’clock. Thank you, everyone. *Don’t* stampede out of the door! Oh, and Euphemia Truelove? *A word*, please.’

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Euphemia Sixten Bookend Truelove, known as Effie, was regretting ever coming to this class. No one had been forced to come, after all. It was optional. A bit like going to school when you didn't have to. And what kind of idiot did that? Effie's friend Wolf Reed, with whom she'd been playing tennis for most of the afternoon, had gone on to rugby practice instead, and her other good friend Raven Wilde had gone home straight after school to feed her horse. So why had Effie come?

For one simple reason. Because Lexy had told her it was the only way she could go up the magic grades and become a wizard and live in the Otherworld for ever.

Effie loved the Otherworld. If only she could find some way of living there all the time, she'd be happy. She had to get better at magic first, though, which was another reason for taking this class. According to Lexy, Dr Green was the very best magical teacher in the whole country. He was a genius, even if he sometimes came across as a little slow and boring. Lexy knew

all about Dr Green because he had so far been on three dates with her Aunt Octavia.

Dr Green now had his back to Effie. He was wiping the blackboard with jerky little movements. His long list of forbidden things was dissolving into particles of chalk and falling to the floor, where Effie definitely thought it belonged. She sighed. How long was she going to have to stand here waiting to find out what she'd done? She knew she had done something. Dr Green had that air about him.

'Put it on the desk,' he said finally, turning around and scowling.

'Sorry?' said Effie.

'Sorry, *sir*.'

Effie sighed again. 'Sorry, *sir*.'

'Put the ring on the desk, please.'

Oh no. Effie gulped silently.

'What ring, *sir*?'

'The ring you have hidden in the lining of your cape. The Ring of the True Hero, I believe. A forbidden boon. Hand it over.'

Effie gulped again. How did he know she had it? Lexy had told her not to bring any boons to this class – never mind that hers were unregistered and especially risky – and so yesterday Effie had hidden them all in her special box at home. All except for the Ring of the True Hero, which Effie had been wearing for tennis practice earlier.

Effie never wore the ring in actual matches, just in training. The first time she'd put it on it had almost killed her. But as

long as she ate and drank enough to restore her energy, it made her strong and agile and all sorts of other things she couldn't quite describe. And it made her feel more connected to the Otherworld. And . . .

'I'm not going to wait all night,' said Dr Green.

He was wearing a brown lounge suit, with flecks of green and orange now being picked out by the moonlight that shone through the window. His shirt was a peculiar shade of yellow. He glanced at his watch and then looked hard at Effie in the way the most horrible teachers tend to just before they haul you out of assembly and make you cry for something you didn't even do.

'Why exactly do you want my ring anyway?' asked Effie.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Why do you want my ring?'

'It is a boon, and you have brought it to my class. Therefore I must confiscate it.'

'But—'

'There's no need to argue. Do as you're told, please.'

'What will you do with it?'

'I will give it to the Guild. If it were a registered boon, I'd be able simply to give it back to you next Monday. But an unregistered boon . . .' He shook his head. 'You'll have to write to the Guild and get an application form to register the item and, I believe, fill in another form to request an application to get it back. And—'

'No,' said Effie, surprising herself.

Dr Green's eyes narrowed. 'What did you say?'

‘No,’ she repeated. ‘I’m not going to give it to you. I’m sorry. I just can’t.’

‘I do have ways of making you,’ said Dr Green, taking a step towards Effie. ‘But of course it won’t come to that. Hand it over.’

Effie took the ring from where she’d hidden it in the lining of her bottle-green school cape. The ring was silver, with a dark red stone held in place by a number of tiny silver dragons. Her beloved grandfather Griffin had given it to her just before he died. There was no way Effie was handing it over to anybody. She put it on her left thumb, where it fitted best. A feeling of confidence and power rippled through her.

‘Stop messing around and give it to me,’ said Dr Green, taking another step forward and holding out his hand. ‘Now.’

Outside the high windows of the church hall an owl hooted. This owl had been watching what was going on and hadn’t liked the look of it. Its call was picked up by a friendly rabbit in a nearby garden, who passed the message on to a dormouse, who passed it to a bat, who told it to another owl who happened to be flying towards the moors. Soon all the animals in the area knew that Euphemia Truelove was in trouble. Perhaps someone would hear the distress call and respond; perhaps they would not. The Cosmic Web was a bit random like that.



Raven and her horse Echo crunched through the frost on the moors. The moon shone down on them, making Raven’s black, wavy hair look as if it was streaked with silver. Raven was a true

witch and could therefore talk to animals. Ever since she'd epiphanised she had been able to have quite long conversations with Echo. Before, they had communicated only through their feelings. Echo 'just knew' when Raven wanted him to break into a canter, and Raven 'just knew' when Echo was feeling annoyed. But now Raven spoke fluent Caballo (the ancient language of horses) and everything was different.

Every day after supper Raven and Echo went out onto the moors, even though it now got dark so early. Much of the time they had to rely on Echo's night-vision to get them home, but tonight the moon was waning gibbous (which meant it was just past full) and Raven could see quite clearly. Everything looked pale and magical when it was bathed in moonlight. And anything touched by moonlight felt happy and peaceful. Everyone knows that you get vitamin D from sunlight. But not very many people know that there is a special nutrient in moonlight that helps living things develop magical powers and cleanses them of any impurities.

The moorland around Raven and Echo was quite bare. No trees, no streams; not even any old fence-posts, as there were on some parts of the moor. The only modern-looking thing for miles was a pair of steel doors that someone had recently built into a mound near some old crofts.

Echo walked carefully through the barest parts of moorland, because there were bogs and rabbit holes that were difficult to see in the moonlight. Every so often a small meteor streaked across the vast night sky. There was something odd about these meteors, although Echo wasn't sure what it was. Anyway, soon

they would be on an ancient path, with its comforting imprints of bygone horses and their riders.

And then, after passing the ruined crofts, Raven was hoping to see the shimmering mystery again. For the last hour, she had been trying to explain to Echo in Caballo what she thought it was. This was almost impossible because not only was the shimmering mystery very difficult to describe, there were no words in Caballo for 'shimmering' or 'mystery'. The closest Raven could get was 'bog in the moonlight', which was something deep and mysterious with a hint of unpredictability and danger. But Echo just snorted and asked why on earth they were looking for bogs in the moonlight. He didn't like bogs; in fact, he went out of his way to avoid them. Bogs were dangerous. You could sink into them and never come out.

'Not a bog, exactly,' said Raven with her mind. Caballo was an unspoken language. 'Maybe like a very high jump.'

Echo didn't much like very high jumps either, and said so.

'But not an *actual* high jump,' Raven tried to say. 'Just something that makes you feel like you're approaching one. Or I suppose like the way I feel about approaching one. Or maybe the way you feel just before you do a *vamos*.'

Echo hardly ever ran away when Raven was riding him. But it did very occasionally happen that he would see a vast expanse of beautiful empty moorland in front of him and want to *vamos* through it. And so he would go, not thinking, galloping hard and fast. The way Raven felt about this was a bit like the way Echo felt about very high jumps. And each allowed the other their little indulgence from time to time. He let her jump, and

she let him *vamos*. He never threw her. That was the main thing. And she always gave him such a nice mixture of oats and alfalfa at the end of the day. She even remembered to buy him Polo mints, which were his favourite thing in the whole world. They understood each other.

It had been after a *vamos* episode the previous Saturday that Raven had first seen the shimmering mystery. It had been as if the moorland in front of them was different in some way. Sort of greener, wilder, more vivid, more magical. The more Raven had asked Echo to walk towards it, the further away it had seemed. That day it had taken almost four hours to get back to the folly – a sort of pretend castle where Raven lived with her mother.

Laurel Wilde hadn't even noticed that her daughter had been missing, of course. She had been too busy drinking expensive sparkling wine and talking about the latest money-making scheme invented by her glamorous publisher, Skylurian Midzhar.

'The first billion-pound book in the world,' Skylurian had said to Laurel Wilde over tea that Saturday afternoon. 'Imagine.'

Raven had been eating her sandwiches and cake quickly so that she could go out on Echo, and had pretended not to be listening. Skylurian and Raven ignored one another most of the time anyway. Laurel Wilde wrote about witches (and warlocks) who went to a magical school, but she didn't believe they truly existed. She was half right because there really was no such thing as a warlock. But Laurel Wilde would have been very surprised to learn that both her daughter and her publisher were powerful witches, and, what's more, that they had recently been on

different sides in the same battle. Skylurian had never actually done anything bad to Raven, though. Indeed, she still occasionally tried to befriend her. It was all rather creepy.

'Imagine, darling,' Skylurian had gone on. 'And a whole 7 percent of it will be yours.'

'I thought we agreed on 7.5 percent,' Laurel Wilde had said.

'Whatever,' breathed Skylurian dismissively. 'It hardly matters. After all, what's 0.5 percent of one billion?'

It was actually five million, but no one did the sum.

'We will be rich beyond our wildest dreams, darling. And all because you were so clever and wrote such a beautiful book.'

Raven had never completely understood why her mother's first book, *The Chosen Ones*, had done so well. It had sold over ten million copies worldwide, and been made into a film and a board-game. It was about magic, of course, but not the real magic that Raven did. In the normal world, the one Raven lived in, anyone could awaken their magical powers if they tried hard enough (or if, as in Raven's case, someone had given them a precious boon from the Otherworld). But in Laurel Wilde's books only a few people were magical.

The Chosen Ones, as they were called, were all born with a strange rash behind their left knee. If you'd been born with the rash, you had almost unlimited supernatural powers. If not, well, bad luck. You were one of the 'Unchosen': unpopular, ugly, often fat, and doomed to a life of having spells cast on you by the Chosen Ones, who were not just beautiful and powerful but quite smug, too.

In the real world, Raven's world, magical power was limited.

In Laurel Wilde's books, anyone born with the rash behind their knee could do pretty much anything they wanted with simply a flick of their thin, white wrist (they were all white). Despite all the magical power at their disposal, the Chosen Ones actually spent much of their time having midnight feasts and worrying about their lost homework. If any of the Unchosen bothered them, they got turned into frogs.

The Chosen Ones was set a very long time ago when people wore frilly bonnets, went on steam trains to boarding school and spent their summer holidays being locked in the cabins of ships or kidnapped by gypsies. Raven had given up halfway through the first one, but most children had read all six in the series.

'And you're sure Albion Freake will buy it?' Laurel had asked Skylurian that previous Saturday afternoon over tea.

'Of course, darling. I have his word. If we can create a limited-edition single volume of *The Chosen Ones*, bound in calf leather with real gold leaf on the page edges, he will give us a billion pounds for it.'

'But every other copy of the book in the world will have to be destroyed first?' Laurel Wilde had looked a bit sad at the thought of that.

'As already discussed, that is indeed what we mean by "limited-edition single volume".'

'But . . .'

'Everyone's read it, darling. Who needs to keep a copy of a book they've already read? And for 7 percent of a billion pounds . . .'

'Or 7.5,' said Laurel.

‘With 7 percent, you’ll be rich, darling, and that’s all that really matters.’

Echo snorted. His breath froze into tiny crystals in the mid-November air. Raven put all thoughts of her mother’s books out of her mind. Out here on the moor she felt free of all those unimportant worldly things. Out here she felt closer to nature. Closer to her true spirit. And closer to something she didn’t recognise or understand, but was definitely there.

Echo snorted again. ‘Is that it?’ he asked Raven, nodding to the left. ‘Your bog in the moonlight?’

And sure enough, up ahead, slightly to the left, was the shimmering mystery.



‘Give me the ring,’ said Dr Green again.

‘No,’ said Effie.

Feelings of courage, strength and daring were rippling through her. This always happened when she was wearing the ring, and now even sometimes when she wasn’t. She could feel power in her shoulders, down her back, through all the muscles of her legs. Effie was only eleven years old, but she would always fight for what she thought was right and true.

‘You are going to regret this, young lady,’ said Dr Green, who began to turn a shade of purple that looked quite wrong set against his brown suit and yellow shirt.

Effie took one step towards the door, but Dr Green took a step in the same direction, blocking her.

‘Don’t you dare defy me! I have never—’

‘Please let me pass,’ said Effie.

‘Give me the ring first.’

‘I thought you said you could make me give it to you,’ said Effie. ‘You obviously can’t. Now please would you get out of my way?’

‘I have never heard such utter rudeness,’ said Dr Green. ‘Unless you give me that ring right now, you are expelled from this class. Do you hear me? Expelled.’

‘Fine,’ said Effie. ‘Expel me. I don’t care. I don’t think you know anything worth learning anyway.’

‘You impudent little . . . I have *never*, in all my years of teaching this class – which I do for free, mind you, out of the goodness of my heart – heard such rudeness from a child. You, young lady, will be hearing more about this from the Guild of Craftspeople. Threatening a teacher. It won’t do. Never in all my years . . .’

‘But I didn’t threaten you. I—’

‘You are expelled. Didn’t you hear me? Now get out.’

The Old Town was quiet and cold. The frost was now calmly working its way around rooftops and the tops of chimneys. The sundial in the small walled-garden of the Apothecary Museum was entirely draped in silver. The cobblestones were slippery under Effie's feet as she walked down the hill towards the Writers' Monument, which now looked as if it was wearing a white bed-cap. Into the black of the sky came the brief flicker of another small meteor. An owl hooted again, sending into the Cosmic Web news of the frost and the meteor and many other things besides.

Effie wondered what the Guild of Craftspeople would do to her. She remembered that they had once forbidden her grandfather from practising magic for five years. Five years! If that happened to Effie, she didn't know what she'd do. She'd only recently epiphanised and found out she was a true hero. She didn't want to lose her powers so soon afterwards. That would just be too unfair.

Not that she had ever done any real magic, of course. It came so easily to her friends Maximilian and Raven. But Effie's skills seemed more annoyingly practical. She had once defeated a dragon, but had not used a single scrap of magic in so doing. Had being expelled meant she'd lost the chance to learn magic for ever? Her grandfather had begun to teach her something called 'Magical Thinking'. Effie knew she needed to progress from that. But how? Perhaps she could ask her cousins in the Otherworld the next time she visited. Or her great-uncle Cosmo. She certainly would never be able to go back to Dr Green's classes.

Most people have to go through a portal if they want to visit the Otherworld. Then they have to travel from wherever the portal delivers them to their intended destination. But Effie had a magical calling card – her most precious boon – that transported her directly outside the ornate gates of Truelove House, in the extremely remote and highly secretive Otherworld village of Dragon's Green, where her cousins Clothilde and Rollo lived with the wizard Cosmo and looked after the Great Library that was housed there.

At least that was what the calling card was supposed to do. But for the first few days that Effie'd had it, she hadn't been able to get it to work at all. Just taking it out did precisely nothing. Effie had tried again and again. She had gone to all the portals she knew – including the Funtime Arcade and Mrs Bottle's Bun Shop – and tried taking out the card in each one, but that hadn't worked: she'd just ended up making the acquaintance of a lot of extremely shady people who wanted to offer her unbelievable sums of money for it. She'd tried sitting in her bedroom in

darkness and silence and reading out the address on the front in a very solemn voice. Nothing.

Despairing, she'd eventually asked the card what it wanted of her.

To her surprise, it had replied.

It's almost impossible to relate completely in any written language what the card actually said about what you do with a portable portal – they are, in fact, so rare that there are barely more than five left in each of the known worlds – but gradually Effie got the knack.

First, you have to find a natural, magical place where you definitely cannot be seen (behind the hedge on the village green near the old Black Pig pub had proved to be a good spot). Then you have to clear your mind. This is not easy. Then, looking only at the card, you have to sort of knock on its door (which sounds a bit odd, but is the closest way of describing how it feels) and wait for a reply. Keeping your mind completely clear – which is hard to do for more than a couple of seconds, but Effie practised a lot – you then have to wait while the card sort of magically frisks you.

After all, not just anyone could go to Dragon's Green. Indeed, one of Rollo's jobs in Truelove House was finding new ways to keep people out. Once Effie was cleared for entry, and while still keeping her mind blank, she had learned to sort of melt downwards – a bit like going underwater – and thus move from one dimension into the next. She always came out in a sort of grey mist just outside the gates to Truelove House. The guards, who now knew her well, then unlocked the gate and let her through.

So Effie had developed rather a pleasant habit. Each morning on the way to school she took out her calling card and popped off behind the hedge to spend a couple of happy days in the Otherworld. Time passed a lot more quickly in the Otherworld, a quirk that meant Effie's two days there amounted to only about forty-five minutes in the Realworld. When her time was up, Effie would hurry away to the portal by the old willow tree on the Keepers' Plains (her calling card only brought her to the Otherworld – she had to go back to the Realworld through a normal portal like any other person) and emerge in her school field five minutes before registration. It had taken a bit of practice to get the timing of this right, which had led to several detentions and a rather stern letter home.

But those first few times Effie had been to the Otherworld had been the very best days of her life so far. Effie's beautiful cousin Clothilde had made her two silk jumpsuits – one in silver and one in a very dark blue – because everyone in the Otherworld wore loose, flowing clothes. It was always midsummer in the Otherworld – or so it seemed to Effie. The days were bright and warm enough to swim outdoors, but the nights were cool enough for an open fire. The complex time differences between worlds meant that Effie never knew precisely when she was going to arrive at Truelove House, but she usually got there in time for supper, which her cousins often ate by the fire in the large drawing room. After that, each day would begin with breakfast in bed, brought by a cheerful woman called Bertie. Effie usually had a large, soft, homemade croissant, porridge with cream and honey, and a whole pot of

strong tea. Then she was free to do whatever she wanted, as long as she stayed in the house and grounds.

Some children might have taken advantage of the time difference and used the stolen time in the Otherworld to catch up on their homework. But Effie preferred to lie on the lawn reading Otherworld books, eating Otherworld cakes and dreaming of Otherworld adventures. Lunch each day was a picnic by the stream at the bottom of the garden, with dragonflies of every possible colour skimming the clear water. Clothilde occasionally took some time off in the afternoon to swim in the pool with Effie, or to walk with her in the nearby woods. But usually Rollo would come out and find Clothilde and take her back to the Great Library, where something important and secret seemed to be going on.

Effie wasn't allowed in the Great Library until she had the mark of the Keeper. Even though she'd passed the test that meant she could have the mark, she couldn't actually get it until Pelham Longfellow came back from the island (which was the Otherworld word for the Realworld). When Pelham Longfellow returned, he was going to take Effie to Froghole to get her mark and to do some shopping. Effie was also due to have a special consultation to determine her '*kharakter*, art and shade', whatever that meant. Well, she knew what *kharakter* was: that was her main ability as a true hero. But the rest was a mystery.

From snatches of conversation Effie had picked up, it seemed Pelham Longfellow was very busy trying to uncover a big conspiracy brewing in Paris, or maybe London. Effie had meant to ask if she could help him in some way, but she hadn't seen

him for ages. She longed to be of some help in the great fight against the Diberi. But even though she had killed the powerful Diberi mage who had attacked her grandfather, no one seemed to want her to do anything else.

Sometimes Effie went up to the very top of one of the towers in Truelove House to see the wizard Cosmo, who had said she could use his small personal library whenever she wanted. It was here that Effie found books to read on the lawn: adventures of true heroes from long ago, strategy guides for fighting demons and monsters, or tales of the Great Split. Cosmo had talked vaguely of things he might teach Effie when he had time. 'Another language,' he'd said recently. 'Mapreading. Meditation. Depending on your art and shade, of course. But not until after the *Sterran Guandré* has passed.' Effie had heard the words *Sterran Guandré* a few times recently. She had been planning to ask Clothilde what they meant.

But the last time Effie had visited the Otherworld she had accidentally overheard a conversation between Clothilde and Rollo that she had instantly known was about her. Perhaps she shouldn't have stayed to listen – eavesdroppers never hear good about themselves, after all – but she had.

'Her place is not here,' Rollo had said. 'Why do you keep encouraging her? Especially now that we hear of this new conspiracy on the island, and with the *Sterran Guandré* so close. Griffin is no longer there to watch what's happening around the northern portals. She should be doing something. And she can't be of use on the island if she squanders all her energy here giggling on the lawn with you.'

‘She’s a child,’ said Clothilde, sighing sadly. ‘She should not have to bear all this responsibility. And we already know the conspiracy is around the southern portals. She can do nothing about that.’

‘For some reason the universe has chosen to give her this “responsibility”,’ Rollo had said. ‘We should be training her to be useful. Although I don’t know how exactly a true hero is supposed to be of use to us – why couldn’t we have had an interpreter, an explorer, or another engineer?’

‘But . . .’

‘And the girl needs more lifeforce, not less. Being here just drains her. I think perhaps we should tell her about . . .’

‘We can’t.’

Before anyone could say anything else, Effie had heard footsteps – probably Bertie’s – and ran. She hurried upstairs to her beautiful room with the now familiar smell of old sun-warmed wood and fresh linen, and changed from her silk jumpsuit into her school uniform. She would not come back again until she had proved herself somehow, she had decided. She would find out about this ‘conspiracy’ in the Realworld and return to Truelove House only when she had something useful to contribute.

As Effie had walked down the stairs of Truelove House that day, she’d thought of all the hours she’d spent with Clothilde on the lawn, laughing at Clothilde’s gentle stories of village life, listening to her talking about growing up in Truelove House with Pelham Longfellow often popping over from his parents’ cottage on the other side of the village. Whenever Clothilde talked about

Pelham Longfellow she blushed, and then looked a little bit sad. But while Effie had been relaxing, the Diberi had been out there plotting something and she hadn't even known. Effie felt ashamed somehow, and very alone. She left through the conservatory without saying goodbye.

The next morning, instead of visiting the Otherworld on her way to school, she called her friends together for a meeting in their secret hideout in the basement of their school. The hideout was called Griffin's Library because it held all the rare hardback last editions of books that Effie's grandfather Griffin Truelove had left for her, and that Effie and her friends had rescued. It had once been an old caretaker's cupboard but was the size of a small room.

Effie explained to her friends that it was very important for them each to use their own special skill to find out everything they could about the conspiracy. Maximilian said he'd use his scholarly skills to find out what *Sterran Guandré* meant. Raven said she'd keep an eye on Skylurian Midzhar, who definitely had connections with the Diberi. Lexy said she'd try to make contact with Miss Dora Wright, the children's former teacher who had disappeared earlier in the term and who Effie believed knew something important. Effie and Wolf upped their tennis training sessions to make sure they were strong fighters for whatever happened next.

But Effie didn't just want to be a strong fighter. She wanted to increase her magical energy so she could spend more time in the Otherworld. And she'd worked out that one way of doing that was to train hard in the Realworld while wearing the Ring

of the True Hero, which somehow seemed to convert her expended energy into lifeforce – or M-currency. When Effie had enough lifeforce, and enough information, and perhaps even some magic skills, she would go back to Rollo and Clothilde and show them how strong and useful she was. But not until then.

Now, just over a week later, waiting for the bus home in the frosty moonlight, having been expelled from her first magic class, Effie wondered whether she should go back to the Otherworld sooner than she'd planned. She suddenly longed to ask Clothilde for advice about Dr Green and the Guild of Craftspeople. Effie couldn't shake the feeling that she'd made a terrible mistake that would have to be put right. Her grandfather had certainly seemed to abide by the Guild's rules. If Effie could just sit down and properly talk to someone who understood . . .

It was almost ten o'clock when Effie opened the door to the small terraced house she shared with her father, step-mother and baby sister. The place was in darkness. Had they all gone to bed? Effie was sure that this was the night that Cait taught a late seminar at the university. Had her father gone to pick her up? But no, his car had been parked on the street. Perhaps he was just 'saving electricity' again. Effie hung her school cape on a peg and went into the kitchen to make a cup of chamomile tea before bed. Lexy had told her always to have chamomile tea at bedtime. It was a natural tonic, apparently, and helped you to sleep.

'Not so fast,' came a voice from the upstairs landing.

'Sorry?' said Effie.

'Don't pretend you didn't hear me,' said Orwell Bookend. He

walked down the stairs holding a candle-lamp. 'I want some answers, young lady. First of all, where is the book?'

'What book?'

Orwell snorted. 'What book? *The Chosen Ones*, of course. What have you done with it?'

'The first Laurel Wilde book? I don't know. I last read it when I was about six. And then you confiscated it. Why do you want it anyway? It's for seven-to-nine-year-olds.'

'You don't have it?'

'No. I just told you. You confiscated it.'

'Why did I do that?'

'Because you didn't want me reading about magic. It was ages ago. When Mum was still here.'

'And where did I put it?'

Effie shrugged. 'How am I supposed to know?'

'I don't like your attitude at all, madam. It's exactly like your teacher said. I've just had Dr Green on the phone, Euphemia, and I'm not very happy with you.'

'But . . .'

'I've had enough of this. Go to your room at once. We can talk about your punishment in the morning.'

'But I just want to make a cup of . . .'

'GO,' hissed Orwell Bookend. He liked shouting, but didn't do it so much when baby Luna was asleep. He had recently become rather an expert in finding ways to shout quietly.

Effie knew it was better not to argue, so she let herself into the ground-floor room she shared with her baby sister. Effie decided that once her father and step-mother were asleep, she

would get her calling card, climb out of the window, go to the village green and take a much-needed trip to Truelove House. Just the thought of it – the warm garden, Clothilde’s kind face – made her feel better.

She lit a candle and walked over to her bookshelves to get the box where she’d carefully hidden her calling card, along with her other precious boons and everything else that was very special to her, including another calling card that Effie could use to get hold of Pelham Longfellow in an emergency, a jar of damson jam from her grandfather’s kitchen, a candlestick, some candles, a mysterious notebook written in Rosian and Effie’s Sword of Light necklace . . .

It wasn’t there. It was gone.

The box wasn’t anywhere on the shelves. It wasn’t under the bed, or under baby Luna’s cot or . . . Effie soon became frantic looking for the box that contained her most treasured possessions. She never would have taken off her gold necklace if it hadn’t been for Dr Green’s class and what Lexy had said about him confiscating boons. And what about Wolf’s Sword of Orphennyus? Effie was on the verge of tears when she got up from the dusty floor for the third time, after checking yet again under her bed. She hadn’t realised that the door had silently opened until she turned and saw her father standing there with a half-smile on his face.

‘Looking for something?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘My . . .’ But she didn’t finish her sentence because she realised that her father had her special box in his hands.

‘Your little box of delights?’ said Orwell.

‘Thank you,’ said Effie. ‘Where did you find it?’

Her father laughed. ‘You think you’re getting this back? Ha! I was going to say that you could have it back when you found the missing copy of *The Chosen Ones*, but now I’m not so sure. The stuff in here is worth something, isn’t it? Where was it your grandfather used to go? Oh yes. The Funtime Arcade. What? You think I didn’t know all his haunts? Yes, I think I could go there and find someone to buy all this from me. I’d get a lot more than fifty pounds for it all, I’m sure.’

‘Those things are mine,’ said Effie.

She remembered the moment – only a few weeks ago – when Pelham Longfellow had told her that the only way anyone would get the gold necklace from her would be if they killed her first. So why on earth had she taken it off like some sort of idiot and just put it in a box?

‘Dr Green suggested that I search your room for any suspicious objects. I hear you’ve been getting involved with this Guild, which you know I don’t approve of. Dr Green said anything suspicious should be handed over to him, but I’m not sure I trust him, so you’re safe for now. I think I’m going to just hang on to this until you decide to behave yourself. And finding me that copy of *The Chosen Ones* will be the first step in getting back in my good books.’

‘If I get it for you, will you give me my box back?’

Orwell narrowed his eyes. ‘So you do know where it is?’

‘No! I told you, I haven’t seen it for years.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘But it’s the truth!’

‘Find it, and then we’ll talk.’

Orwell slammed the door, silently.



Echo stepped towards the thing-without-name. Raven was right, there was something deep and strange about it. Echo usually felt certain about something, completely sure if it would bring danger or pleasure. But this, he didn’t know. He took another step without looking properly at the ground. A skylark flew out of her nest and hovered above the moor. Her call began quite crossly, but then developed into the usual stream of news from the Cosmic Web. And one item on the list was of particular interest.

‘Did you hear that?’ Echo said to Raven.

‘Yes,’ said Raven, looking troubled.

‘The long-haired hero-child with the ring – that is your friend?’

‘Yes,’ said Raven sadly.

‘She is in deep danger, this friend.’

‘Yes. Oh dear, Echo. What shall we do?’

‘We can find this sparkling bog again tomorrow. For now we will go and help this friend. Let us *vamos*.’

Raven and Echo cantered home while a brace of meteors leapt unthinkingly through the black sky. As soon as she could, Raven would sat down at her desk and write a letter to the Luminiferous Ether. She just hoped it wasn’t too late.