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Nytethorn

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Chapter One

Sweet Dreams

Of the times Mz. Applegate could have chosen to talk to Miles, after school was the worst.

Why not during recess? Miles didn't even like recess all that much; if anything, it was the time he got picked on the most. But after school was *Miles'* time, when he could forget about work and multiplication tables and writing words three times each, and disappear inside his very own world. The very thought of after school was really what kept Miles going through school itself.

But here he was.

"Do you know why we're having this talk, Miles?" Mz. Applegate asked, sweetly. Miles wasn't sure of the exact reason, but he had a generally good idea.

"I guess my grades have slipped a bit," Miles replied.

"Well, that's true," Mz. Applegate went on. "But it's not so much the *what* that I'm worried about as the *why*. With so much going on in students' lives, I can expect little ups and downs in grades. In your case, though, I think there are some very identifiable reasons."

"I can bring them back up, Mz. Applegate, no problem at all," Miles promised. He gazed past his fifth-grade teacher at the map on the wall behind her, with the little cartoon characters of different nationalities. Miles imagined the little Japanese character in the samurai outfit marching over to the British fellow, a knight in armor. Who would win?

"See, you're doing it right now, aren't you?" Mz. Applegate asked. "I love your imagination, Miles, but I'm afraid it's finally started to get in the way of your schoolwork. Take your short story, for instance." Miles took the papers from Mz. Applegate and scanned them quickly. This was a story he'd written during Creative Time, titled *The Day No Door Would Open*. It was a fun little tale,

about a day where all doors everywhere revolted and refused to open for anybody. Miles had found the idea merely entertaining at first, but the more he explored it, the more he realized just how much trouble everyone would be in if doors stopped being so nice.

“I’m sorry if you didn’t like it,” Miles said. “I could write another one.”

“No, Miles, it was a wonderful story. It’s just that…” Mz. Applegate paused, twisting one of her blonde curls around her index finger as she searched her brain for the right word. “You were working on it during Math Hour, and during the science experiment too. You see why that’s a problem, don’t you?” Honestly, Miles didn’t think he’d missed anything terribly advanced, but he could see why a concerned teacher would think this was an issue.

“Math Hour is for math and science time is for science,” Miles said, unexcitedly.

“It’s very nice to hear you say that, but I’m not certain that you understand it. Just because you’re not writing your stories during those times doesn’t mean that I have your attention. I’m not quite sure how to fix this,” Mz. Applegate said, pushing her glasses up her nose. Miles didn’t like her choice of words; “fix” was a word reserved for machines that were broken, or situations gone wrong that needed solving. He didn’t like to think of himself as broken or a situation.

“I can start by working on it,” Miles said, not sure what he was supposed to say. “I’ll try turning all the little movies in my head off from now on, so I can pay extra attention during class.” Mz. Applegate sighed.

“Again, this is all very comforting to hear, but I’ve got no way of making sure. I think I might have to discuss this issue with your parents. You understand you’re not in any trouble, right? I’m just worried about you, is all.” Miles nodded once. He almost wished that he *was* in trouble, because then his

parents would tell him not to do it again, and that would be that. This wasn't some little mistake, though. This problem was *himself*, and he wasn't sure how a problem like that could go away.

"I understand, Mz. Applegate. I'll tell them to expect a call."

"That's good, Miles. You can go home now. You walk, don't you?" Miles nodded again as he hopped off of the stool, picked up his blue backpack, and cast the cartoon map one last glance as he left the classroom.

The sky was gray that day as Miles made his way down the sidewalk, taking care not to step on a single crack. It wasn't particularly cloudy, which was a shame; Miles liked visualizing the clouds as vaporous creatures, giants of gas and moisture that would hurl themselves against one another all day long.

Mz. Applegate was right! Miles realized. He really couldn't stop the ideas in his head, not even if he wanted to. If he was thinking of the clouds fighting each other without a single cloud in the sky, how could he stand a chance on a cloudy day, with the wind knocking them this way and that? Clearly, keeping his thoughts in check was something that was going to take a lot of practice.

Miles waved as he walked past old Mr. Bureagard's house, with Mr. Bureagard himself sitting on the white porch, the paint peeling off in flakes. Miles always thought Mr. Bureagard, with his rounded shape, short stature, and bald head, looked an awful lot like a roly-poly bug that was turned by some sorcerer into a human form.

"Hello, Miles," Mr. Bureagard said, sitting on his white porch with the paint peeling off. "Coming back a little late from school, aintcha?"

"Yes, Mr. Bureagard," Miles replied, politely. "I had to have a talk with my teacher after school. Nothing serious."

"I would certainly hope not," Mr. Bureagard said. "Not beating up *too*

many of the classmates, I hope.” Miles smiled at the little joke.

“I *wish*,” he retorted. Mr. Bureagard grinned, revealing two rows of unevenly spaced teeth.

“That’s the spirit, kid. Now go home, before your mom gets worried.”

“See you round, Mr. Bureagard,” Miles said as he waved goodbye.

Something he could never figure out was why he seemed to get along so much better with old people, and animals. Although they couldn’t have a pet in the apartment, Miles had always wanted a little dog to go on adventures with, or a cat that after being shown kindness, would reveal that it in fact was a talking magical cat, sent to Miles in order to inform him of his true destiny.

Above all else, Miles was constantly on the lookout for his true destiny. Whenever he went to the library, he would make sure to find the oldest, most beat-up looking book on the shelf and open it, just in case it was the kind of book that would warp him to a realm of magic and wonder. Whenever he found injured bugs on his windowsill, he would take them outside and let them free, just in case that particular bug was a messenger, sent to look for a compassionate child. Whenever he heard a strange noise at night, he’d turn on the lights, just in case there was *something* there. So far, Miles hadn’t had good luck on any of these fronts.

He figured it could only be a matter of time.

“Hey,” said a recognizable voice, from behind Miles. Turning around revealed one of Miles’ oldest rivals, an unpleasant child by the name of Alexander Dorn. His brow seemed constantly furrowed, as though he were always annoyed about something. Miles gazed past Alex; Mr. Bureagard was now quite a number of blocks away.

“Hello Alex,” Miles responded sweetly. “I thought you usually took the bus home.”

“I *usually* do,” Alex snapped, “but today I had to stay after school, so now I’ll have to catch the late bus. Any ideas why I had to stay after school?”

That was a nasty question to which Miles already knew the answer. Last week, Alex had torn one of Miles’s stories up and sprinkled the pieces into Miles’ lunch. Of course, Mz. Applegate had seen it happen and signed Alex up for detention right away, which Miles had wished wasn’t the case. It was always so much easier when the adults didn’t get involved, over so much faster.

“Perhaps because of lunch last week? But I don’t know for sure,” Miles said.

“You don’t know for sure? Oh, I think you *do* know, Miles, and now you’re gonna pay for it. Get him!”

Faster than Miles could react, a pair of arms grabbed his own from behind as Alex’s mouth curled into a wicked smile.

“I’m home, Mom,” Miles said, as he walked through the front door of the apartment and closed it behind him. He quickly dropped his backpack on the floor and hurried into the kitchen, doing his best to straighten his hair so his parents wouldn’t ask any questions. His mother sat at the table, her dark hair tied back in a messy ponytail, with a pen behind her ear and a crossword puzzle on the table.

“Everything okay? You sure took your time getting back here,” his mother said, looking up to face him. She motioned behind her towards the fridge. “There’s a leftover sandwich in the fridge if you want something to eat before we have dinner.”

“Is Dad going to be around for dinner tonight?” Miles asked as he opened the fridge and rummaged through its contents.

“Probably not,” his mother said, with a sigh. “So what was the occasion?”

No bullies this time, right?”

“Nope. Teacher talk.” Miles pulled the turkey sandwich from the fridge and started eating it before he even got a plate.

“Teacher talk? Uh oh,” his mother started. “You didn’t get in trouble for anything, did you?”

“Mz. Applegate says I’m not in trouble,” Miles assured, hoping to calm his mother down. “She’s just...*worried* about me. Whatever that means.”

“Worried? Why is she worried, Miles?” Miles frowned at his mother’s question. It seemed like every answer he offered was just an invitation for another question.

“She’s worried I’m not paying enough attention in class,” Miles answered. “Don’t worry, you’ll get all the details later when she calls you about it.”

“So we’re getting a phone call this time. Doesn’t sound good.”

“Yeah, but she liked my story. *The Day No Door Would Open*, is what I called it.” Miles fished the folded-up story from his pocket and handed it to his mother, who raised an eyebrow.

“That’s...nice,” she said, unconvincingly. Miles snatched the story right back.

“If you don’t want to read it, you don’t have to,” Miles said.

“That’s not it, Miles. It’s just...I’m worried about you. We got a call just like this a month ago, for the same reason. No bad behavior, no tardiness...just a bad attention span. Remember?” Miles knew his teacher and mother cared, but he was getting a little sick of hearing the words “worried about you”.

“Yeah, I remember,” Miles said, folding the story back into fourths so it would fit in his pocket again. “It’s just...doing what she asks is really hard. Basically, she wants me to turn my brain off.”

“I don’t understand,” his mother replied. “Doesn’t she want you to pay more attention? That sounds like keeping your brain *on*.”

“The boring part of my brain, anyway,” Miles said. “The fun part, the exciting part, the part that gets me through the day is the part she wants me to turn off. As soon as I turn that off, I’m pretty much a zombie.” Miles let his tongue waggle out of his mouth and raised his arms stiffly, to illustrate.

“Have you ever considered that maybe there’s a way to pay attention without becoming a zombie?” Miles pulled his tongue back in. He knew that was coming, but the truth wasn’t that he didn’t want to turn that part of his brain off. The truth was that he didn’t know how.

“Once or twice,” Miles lied. “I think I’m gonna go practice being a zombie in my room.” His mother patted him on the head and tousled his brown hair. “Since Dad isn’t going to be around for dinner, I guess that means he won’t be able to paint the stars on my wall tonight either, right?” His mother shrugged.

“That depends on if he gets back before your bedtime or not. You know that whether or not it happens tonight, your father really looks forward to...”

“I know,” Miles said. “He said the same thing last week.”

As soon as he entered his room, he checked his windowsill for injured bugs.

No luck today.

Miles lay in his bed, curled up beneath his dark green blankets, when he heard the front door to the apartment open. That was his father, he knew, so he rolled over and pretended to be asleep the way he always did when his father came into the room.

“Miles?” His father asked, as he creaked the door open.

“Oh, hey Dad,” Miles said, as he rolled back over and dramatically wiped at his eyes.

“You know, I don’t think you’re ever actually asleep before I get back,” his father said, smiling.

“And I don’t think you’re ever back before I’m in bed,” Miles said. “How about that?”

“How about that is right,” his father said, as he sat down on Miles’ covers. Miles ran his hand down the fabric of his father’s white business shirt; it felt smooth and warm. “I’m sorry I get back later and later. This is only gonna be a temporary thing.”

“Yeah, I know,” Miles said. “I guess this means no stars tonight.”

“Not tonight,” his father agreed. “The whole thing’s gonna take a couple hours to do, so it needs to be a night I get back at a reasonable time.”

“I remember the rhyme you taught me about the Big Dipper, though,” Miles said. “Big Dipper, shining bright, always pointing away from the right. We’ll paint that one first.”

“Sounds good, Miles. Maybe tomorrow night,” his father said, with a sigh.

“So did Mz. Applegate call yet, or what?”

“Nope, not yet. I think that happens tomorrow. Anything I should be worried about? Kids at school giving you trouble again?” There it was again: *worried*.

“Not really. She’ll tell you that I don’t pay enough attention, and that she thinks I spend too much time in my head.” Before his father could ask how that made sense, Miles pointed to the left half of his head. “The fun part of my head, I mean.”

“Well, that’s not so bad,” his father said, as he straightened out Miles’

blue-and-white striped pajama shirt and buttoned the top button. “I think the best phone call I can get from a teacher is that my son is being too much of the awesome guy that he is.” Miles’ head drooped as he frowned. “What is it, Miles?”

“It’s nice of you to say things like that, but it’s not true.” Miles looked back up, to meet his father’s gaze, from behind rectangular glasses. “I wish the fun half of my brain had an on-off switch, Dad, that I could flick whenever I wanted to. Then school would be easy, and teachers wouldn’t call the house, and I could make you and Mom happy.” His father pushed the bangs from Miles’ eyes, and rubbed his forehead with his thumb.

“Don’t go saying things like that,” his father said. “I, for one, am pretty happy you don’t have that switch. I wouldn’t want you to ever turn that off, not for a second. So you get a B every once in a while. You have to understand, Miles, that you’re always making us happy. You know that, right?” Miles half-nodded, not really meaning it. “I’m going to let you go to bed now, but please keep that in mind. Sweet dreams.” His father kissed him once on the forehead, and then left the room.

Miles rolled over again and wondered momentarily on the saying “sweet dreams”. Who ever actually had sweet dreams? All the dreams Miles had were either scary nightmares or weird movies that made absolutely no sense. What was a good dream even like?

He wondered if he’d ever find out.

Chapter Two

Of Nightcaps and Nytekaps

As Miles tossed and turned in discomfort, he couldn't help but notice that what he thought was his pillow felt much... *leafier*, all of a sudden, as if someone had exchanged it for some kind of bush. On top of that, what he

thought was his bed didn't feel very soft anymore, and what he thought was his room felt awfully drafty. When he finally sat up and opened his eyes, he realized that most of the things he'd thought with his eyes closed were actually something else entirely.

He was now sitting in a forest, a forest quite unlike any Miles had ever seen before. The grass was dark blue instead of green, as were the trees, which kept the area dim by blocking out all but the most persistent streams of moonlight. Here comes another strange dream, Miles thought. As soon as he had thought that, he remembered that most dreams took him several minutes to realize that they were, in fact, a dream. What was it about this one that gave it away so quickly? Perhaps because the beginning of this one had actually started with him waking up, he guessed.

Miles stood up and stretched, wondering if it was safe to go for a walk in a forest barefoot. He didn't ponder on it too long before concluding that it was only a dream, so it wasn't as though anything could hurt him. He set off down the dusty dirt path, a paler shade of blue than the surrounding plants. And why was everything so blue?

The more attention Miles paid to the local vegetation, the stranger they became. One flower resembled a butterfly so strongly that Miles expected it to fly away, until closer inspection. Smelling the flower triggered a peculiar floating sensation; a lightness came over Miles' feet, as though he could bound over the treetops.

As soon as it was there, the feeling was gone.

Another flower took the unmistakable shape of a big arrow on a coiled stem, pointing straight down. After Miles smelled it, his head became dizzy, and he began to feel as though the ground was rushing towards him.

Shaking his head dispelled the sensation in an instant.

A good number of the plants were completely black, as though someone had dumped a bucket of ink on top of them. They often came with menacing spines, or bulbous growths that reminded Miles of poisonous mushrooms. He tried to avoid the black plants as much as possible, for there was something about them that made his stomach uneasy.

In one little patch off to the side was a plant whose face was hidden by a white leaf that grew over the flower. The leaf had two little holes in it, almost as though the leaf had actually been intended as a sort of mask.

“Hello there,” Miles said to the plant, as he greeted most objects that reminded him of faces or people. Miles couldn’t be certain, but it seemed as if the plant craned its view to look back. For all Miles knew, that could have been just a breeze.

The more Miles stared back at the plant, the more it intrigued him, and the worse he felt for leaving it alone in this place. Pulling on it just the slightest bit completely uprooted the entire plant, so easily that Miles wondered if perhaps the plant didn’t really want to be there in the first place. He placed it gently in his pajama pocket, with the masked part of the flower peeking out in case it wanted to watch.

Before too long, the path widened, and following it just a bit more led to a grassy clearing, where Miles could finally look up and see all the stars in the night sky. His eyes flit from star to star until he finally located the Big Dipper. He recited his father’s rhyme under his breath as he raised his thumb up against the constellation: “Big Dipper, shining bright, always pointing away from...”

Something was wrong.

The Big Dipper in Miles’ dream was clearly pointing away from the left. It would have been fine if the whole thing was also upside-down, because then it could have just been a trick of the perspective, but the way the Big Dipper

was now, it was as if Miles' dream had simply gotten it the wrong way.

"Weird," Miles whispered. The more constellations he identified in the sky, the more he realized that all of them had been flipped. Either the dream had a very bad sense of left and right, or it was supposed to be taking place on the other side of the stars.

"And what do you make of that?" Miles asked, turning to the masked plant in his pocket. A fuzzy little purple pom-pom had somehow wound around the flower along a length of fine red string, which followed back into a nearby blue hedge. "This'll only be a moment," Miles assured the plant as he began to untie it. He wasn't sure why he was still speaking to it, but there was *something* about it that made it seem as though it were listening.

Suddenly, the pom-pom jerked violently, first left, and then right.

Miles looked back at the hedge; whoever the string belonged to was trying hard to reel in its prize, almost like a fishing line.

"Stop that!" Miles shouted to his unseen opponent, but either the thing didn't hear him or didn't care, because it only pulled harder. The masked plant almost flew straight out of the pocket, but Miles caught it just in time. This prompted his foe to pull even harder, to the point where Miles was afraid the flower would rip in half if one of them didn't let go.

Miles released it, and the pom-pom only brought the plant back about halfway. It began to twitch the catch around from side to side. Miles couldn't have been certain, but it almost seemed as if he was being taunted.

The twitching stopped, and the pom-pom and its captive flower remained motionless. Miles walked up to the plant and tried lightly picking it up with just two fingers; he didn't want to alarm the string-holder.

The flower zoomed away from his fingers and into the hedge, from where Miles heard the noise of unmistakable, twittering laughter, extremely

high-pitched.

“Oh, that is *it*,” Miles said as he rolled up his sleeves and approached the dark blue hedge. Putting both of his hands on two branches, Miles split the hedge in two without much effort.

A bolt of red darted out of the broken hedge and scrambled up the side of a nearby tree. It ran along the length of its trunk and onto the underside of a thick, low-hanging branch, so when it stopped moving, it was standing upside-down on the branch’s bottom. For the first time, Miles could get a good look.

The bizarre creature looked exactly like a cone-shaped hat, made from red fabric. A white mask was attached to the front of the hat, whose creator wasn’t very artistic. Two black circles were supposed to be eyes, but one circle was much larger than the other, and the only other feature was what Miles guessed was supposed to be a mouth, which was little more than a long line with other smaller lines crossing it, like the stitching on a baseball. Two tiny blue shoes secured the critter to the branch, and a purple pom-pom dangled from the top of its cone, wound around the masked plant.

“No wonder you want it so bad,” Miles said. “It almost kind of looks like you.” The creature responded with a stream of squeaky gibberish; if it could understand what Miles was saying, it didn’t show it. “Can you hear what I’m saying?” Miles asked.

The masked hat flipped to the top of the branch, now right-side up. It replied with another series of nonsensical chirping noises.

“Maybe you can hear me, but I don’t think you can understand me.” This time, the mask on the hat rotated slightly, as if the creature was trying to get a better look at Miles. “How about you give me back what’s mine, okay?” Miles extended an open hand.

The creature started doing its best attempt at a growl; it was still quite squeaky, but it made its feelings on the matter quite clear. “All right, how about...we trade?” This got Miles another small mask rotation; now the creature was listening.

“Here, watch this,” Miles said as he knelt down and picked a large, leafy plant, roughly the size of the stolen one. With a quick two-finger jab, he poked two eyeholes in one of the leaves, and then bent the leaf slightly so the leaf covered the middle of the stem. “How about that? Now you can have one that looks like you, and I can get back what’s mine.”

The little hat-creature inched forward on the branch. It studied the offering momentarily, but then its gaze moved past the gift and towards something behind and above Miles.

“That’s very clever,” said a voice from behind Miles. He turned on his heel to regard the giver of the compliment.

“Why thank...” Miles stopped short; the newcomer was quite a sight.

About as tall as his father, this fellow wore a wide-brimmed black hat atop his head, and a white mask devoid of features except two eye-shaped holes, right where they should be. There were no eyes behind the mask, though; only darkness. The rest of him lay concealed under a black shroud, which he clung around himself like it was the coldest day of winter. “...you. So, does everything here have to wear a mask?”

“Only those with something to hide,” the stranger replied. “It was very smart of you not to lose your temper with the Nytekap. There’s an old superstition that any violence against a Nytekap gets you 100 years of bad luck.”

“I’d never hit the little guy,” Miles said. “He’s just sort of grabby, is all. Is that what they’re called? Nightcaps?”

“No no,” the man corrected. “Nytekap.”

“Right, that’s what I thought,” Miles said. “Nightcap.”

“It’s been *so* long since I’ve heard someone speak it that way,” the man continued, “but you’d best learn the proper way, or else no one else here in Nyte will know what you’re saying.”

“And this place is called Night?” Miles asked.

“Now repeat after me. Nytekap. N-y-t-e-k-a-p.”

“N-y-t...that’s not right,” Miles said. “That’s not how I learned to spell it. What difference does it make, anyway? You say it your way, I’ll say it mine.”

“If you want people here to understand, you have to picture the word in your head my way until it becomes natural. Trust me on this.”

“You can’t tell the difference!” Miles shouted, becoming a little annoyed.

“Try me,” the stranger said. “Say the word in any combination of our spellings, and I’ll tell you which ones are which.”

“You’re kidding.” Miles said. The man just stood there. “All right...nightcap, nightcap, nightcap, nightcap. There. Now which ones were which?”

“You’re really terrible at this,” the man said, shaking his head.

“I’ll spell ‘Nytekap’ the way it’s meant to be spelled,” Miles said, crossing his arms.

“There it is!” The man exclaimed. “I knew you had it in you. Not so bad, is it?” Miles tried to peer past the darkness behind the eyeholes, but there was nothing to be seen.

“You really *can* hear it, can’t you?” Miles asked, warily. “How are you doing that?”

“Old Nyte secret. And how do you spell Nyte?”

“N...” Miles paused. “...y...t-e?”

“Excellent. You’re better at this than you first let on, I must confess.”

“Thanks,” Miles said, sourly. “So what do I call you?”

“Now *there’s* a question,” the man said, as an ink-black vine slithered from underneath his shroud and picked his hat up off his head, twirling it about. “That all really depends. Heroes have called me the greatest asset to justice Nyte has ever known, while tyrants have dubbed me an injurious rascal, deserving of the most terrible pains they can conjure. Some call me a rogue, some call me a wanderer, and some...” He paused. “...some call me a Loosid, although that’s not one I hear very often. It’s quite old.”

“But I’m not a hero, or a tyrant, or quite old. So what does that leave?” Miles asked.

“In that case,” he said, as the vine caught the hat by the brim and tipped it for a dramatic bow, “you may call me Nytethorn.”

“Nytethorn,” Miles said out loud. “Spelled the strange way?”

“That’s right,” Nytethorn said as he replaced his hat on his head. “And who is it that I have the pleasure of meeting?” The vine crept back underneath the shroud.

“Miles, spelled M-i-l-e-s,” Miles answered. “I’ve got to admit, this is probably one of the most elaborate dreams I’ve had in a long time. I’m enjoying it so far, but I hope it doesn’t turn into a nightmare at some point.”

“This is no dream, Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s.” Nytethorn said.

“Really? So you could just pull out a map and point out Nyte, then.”

“Not all places that are real show up on maps,” Nytethorn replied. “Again, you’d better get your story straight before you walk around saying these things and everyone thinks you’re a lunatic. You remember all those plants you saw in the forest?” Miles nodded. “In this land, the grasses, the shrubs, every fern and flower are dreams. Same goes for nightmares.”

“You’re telling me that this...” Miles turned back to regard the Nytekap, who was now holding the present instead of the original masked flower. “...what it was holding was a dream?”

“That’s right,” Nytethorn agreed. “You should hang onto this little fellow. I think he likes you.” The Nytekap bounded atop Miles’ right shoulder, and stared at him expectantly. It had dropped the gift on the ground, and was now spinning its pom-pom idly in circles.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind having him along, so long as he doesn’t steal any more of my things. Are we clear on that?” Miles asked. The Nytekap nodded its mask vigorously. “Good. Now, Nytethorn, if you wouldn’t mind...”

Turning back to where Nytethorn had stood revealed the empty path once more. Miles and the Nytekap were now alone in the clearing. However Nytethorn had exited, it had been extremely quickly as well as silent.

“Not much of a goodbye person, is he?” Miles said.

The little Nytekap twittered in response.

Chapter Three

The Incorrectional Facility

Miles wandered away from the clearing, wondering what other strange sights lay in store for him, but the grass and trees quickly disappeared to make way for stony plains and unforgiving crags. Aside from the occasional black shrub (or “nytemare”, as Nytethorn had called them), the terrain was almost completely featureless. Miles would almost trip on a ledge or step on a stone, but the little Nytekap would start twittering away, alerting Miles just in time.

“You’re pretty useful for a little hat thing, you know that?” Miles said. The Nytekap did its best to take a miniature bow, by creasing its body at the center. As it looked up, it rotated its mask slightly, the way it did whenever it found something interesting. Miles also heard voices off in the distance, so he climbed atop the nearest rocky knoll to get a better look.

Down in the next valley over stood a huge gray building, flat and square

with barred windows. A large group of creatures were chained together outside, like the prison gangs in old movies, and all of them were splitting stones with large hammers that they swung in unison. Most of the creatures reminded Miles of storybook goblins, with pointed ears, long noses, and bristly hair. Their skin ranged from pale blue to sickly green, and all shades in between. Some were short and plump, while others were tall and had limbs that were thin and spindly, like twigs.

“Why do you suppose they’re cracking rocks like that?” Miles asked. The Nytekap responded in a non-stop flood of excited squeaks. “I don’t know what you’re saying, but it’s probably a good guess.” The Nytekap didn’t stop; its chirps only got louder. “What’s so exciting about it? Just looks like tough work from up here.”

“Then perhaps you need a better look,” said a voice from behind, as an unyielding grip clenched onto the back of Miles’ collar.

Miles was unceremoniously taken inside the front door of the building and thrown onto the hard wooden floor. In front of him was a secretary’s desk, complete with one of the little pointy-eared people from outside, this one colored olive-green. Her oily dark hair crept down to her shoulders, and she was deeply engaged in whatever she was writing.

“And what have we got ourselves here?” She asked, in a high, cackling voice as she rested her pencil on the desk with a resounding click.

“Found him on the perimeter,” the gruff voice from before answered, behind Miles.

“I was just watching your...work outside,” Miles said, a little nervous. “Very impressive.”

“You’re darn *right* it’s impressive,” the little secretary sneered. “It’s the

best Masked-Dream-hunting operation this side of the Valley, and we can't have little nosies like yourself running off and telling other installments about the way we run things here."

"Oh, I wouldn't tell anybody. And neither would he," Miles said, pointing to the Nytekap, who nodded vigorously.

"That's all well and good, but that's not a chance I'm willing to take. Technically, I can't put children to work on the rocks, can I?"

"Technically," the voice from behind answered, in a cold tone.

"The document says..." she continued as she pulled a paper from a drawer and put on her glasses, "...that no Bodkin, Laifkin, or Nytefolk child is permitted to be forced into service."

"Well then, I suppose it's a good thing I'm a Nytefolk," Miles lied, hoping he'd picked the right one.

"You? A Nytefolk?" The secretary removed her glasses and blinked her eyes several times. "For Bod's sake, you couldn't pass for one if we painted stars over your skin. Turn around, *he's* a Nytefolk." Miles turned to face his captor for the first time.

This tall and well-muscled man looked fairly human enough, aside from the blue-black color of his skin, his short silvery hair, and the shining pinpricks of light that dotted his skin and arms like freckles. Stranger still was the long black coat he wore, with a picture of a weeping eye on the front and a gleaming zipper running down the back

"And you don't look nothing like him," the secretary went on. "I do believe we've got ourselves one of them hoop-poles I've heard so much about." The Nytefolk by the door heaved an icy sigh.

"*Loopholes*, you mean," he said.

"That's what I said! Anyways, seeing as how your kind isn't accounted

for in the literature...which is?" The secretary paused, waiting for an answer.

"A human. I'm probably on there somewhere," Miles suggested.

"A yoomin? You ever heard of a yoomin, Mordeth?" The secretary asked.

"Can't say as I have," the Nytefolk responded.

"Afraid yoomins aren't accounted for in these here parts, boy. Give him some chains meant for a Knee-High, Mordeth. Anything else, and his little wrists just might slip out," the secretary concluded, with a grin of yellow teeth.

After being taken outside, Miles was led by Mordeth to a vacant spot on the chain gang, between a bluish, lanky goblin-like fellow and another Nytefolk, except this one was slimmer than Mordeth. He wore a white cloth shirt whose sleeves had become so tattered that they now wound around his arms like bandages. A lavender scarf, tied so that a tail drooped over either shoulder, hung from his neck.

"This here is where you'll be working," Mordeth said as he locked a pair of cuffs around Miles' arms. The Nytekap, still on Miles' shoulder, growled the entire time, which prompted Mordeth to shoot the Nytekap an evil stare.

"You know if you hurt a Nytekap, it's 100 years of bad luck," Miles said.

"Suppose it's a good thing I'm not very superstitious," Mordeth retorted as he took the Nytekap's pom-pom and tied it into a knot around the chain, leaving the poor Nytekap suspended above the ground. It pumped its little blue boots furiously in the air. "Be seeing you," Mordeth said, as he straightened out his coat and walked off back to the building.

"Some piece of work, ain't he?" The blue creature on the right said, in a voice that sounded like a squawk. "You can't expect any nicer from a Turncoat, though."

“A Turncoat? What’s that?” Miles asked, as he attempted to pick the hammer up off of the ground with little success.

“You don’t even know about *Turncoats*?” The blue fellow stammered. “You’re really from out-of-town, aintcha, kid?”

“You could say that,” Miles replied. “I really don’t know the first thing about this place. I don’t know what you are, or what Turncoats are, or just about anything. Well, other than my friend here is called a Nytekap, and you...” Miles pointed to his other neighbor. “...are a Nytefolk, right?”

“Very perceptive,” the Nytefolk responded, with more than a little sarcasm.

“This is gonna take some serious work,” the blue creature said, scratching his bald head. “Well, for starters, my name is Spricket, and I’m a Bodkin. Quiz time! What’s my favorite word?”

“I don’t think you told me that,” Miles pointed out.

“Wrong answer!” Spricket yelled. “My favorite word is grumblerub. And don’t you forget it! You’re gonna be quizzed on it again later,” Spricket warned as he picked up his hammer and crushed the nearest rock in half. For a Bodkin with such wiry arms, he certainly performed his job well. “It’s a word in Old Bodkin that means something that you’re worrying about too much. You know what they say, ‘don’t worry about the grumblerub, and it’s all grumblerub!’ Oldest Bodkin saying in the book.” Spricket reduced another rock to shards.

“They didn’t even tell me why I’m splitting rocks in the first place,” Miles said.

“We’re supposed to be looking for Masked Dreams to hand over to Kersploosh. You know, the Bodkin inside with the glasses?” Spricket motioned towards the building. “Of course, the Turncoats just let Kersploosh think that she owns the whole joint, but in truth, they’re the ones running the show.

Cunning bunch of punks...”

“You never told me what Turncoats are,” Miles said.

“Oh, right! How to explain, how to explain...” Spricket drummed his fingers against his hammer in thought.

“The Turncoats are Darkshade’s network of spies and enforcers,” the Nytefolk said, right before he crushed another rock. “And for some reason or another they’ve taken a real interest in Masked Dreams lately. Can’t seem to get enough of them.”

“Masked dreams...” Miles repeated.

“Yeah, you know, those dreams with the little leaf that looks like a mask. They’re rare as they come,” Spricket said. Miles thought back to the dream from the forest; he wondered if holding onto it would have spared him this whole mess. “And before you ask, Darkshade’s the worst thing to happen to Nyte in a *long* time. He showed up one day, started conquering up in the north, and before you know it, he’s making a whole army of Shades to take over the entire *world!*” Spricket finished with a dramatic pause.

“He didn’t just ‘show up one day,’” the Nytefolk added. “It was a Bodkin who created him. Don’t just pretend like you forgot that little fact.”

“Let’s not confuse...uh...this kid with minor details. Sorry, kid, never got your name.” Spricket said.

“Miles. And what was your name?” Miles asked, turning to the Nytefolk.

“Wynston,” he replied, tersely.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Spricket and Wynston, but I’ll be going soon, so I can’t stay and talk much longer.” Miles said.

“Is that right?” Wynston asked, finally stopping his work to stare at Miles in disbelief. “And whatever gave you that impression?”

“I just need to think up of a clever escape plan, and then I’ll be on my

way, to explore the rest of Nyte.”

“I like the way you think, Miles,” Spricket said with a smile. “That’s exactly what I’ve been telling Wynston here, but he just rolls his eyes and ignores me. But with the two of us together, I think we can work something out.”

“Your ‘escape plan?’” Wynston asked, distastefully. “Your escape plan is to pick a lock on the cell door with the nettle from a nytemare. Honestly, I don’t think you could pick a lock if somebody gave you the key.”

"Line up!" Mordeth barked, from somewhere in the distance. "Time to go back to your cells."

"It's gonna happen tonight, you just wait and see," Spricket said as he got in line and picked up a noticeably long black nettle from the ground, out of a dark nytemare patch. Miles took some time to untie the Nytekap from the chain, and then got behind Spricket.

"If you're going to break out, could you come find me?" Miles asked as he put the Nytekap back on his shoulder. "I don't think I want to stay here any longer than I have to. Splitting rocks is something I could do back home if I wanted to, but I'd like to see as much of this place as I can before I wake up."

"Before you wake up?" Wynston asked, taking his place in line behind Miles. "What's that supposed to mean? You look pretty awake to me."

"Maybe he's sleepwalking!" Spricket suggested, excitedly.

"And sleeptalking?" Wynston asked, sarcastically.

"And sleep-eye-opening. I've got to hand it you, kid, that's pretty impressive for someone who's asleep. Doesn't the light even wake you up?"

Miles giggled, while Wynston just sighed.

The cell designated for Miles and Wynston was a tiny chamber, with a

cell door clicked tightly into its cold, metal frame. Some boards had been messily nailed together to create a makeshift bench, hanging off the wall by a pair of chains. A single barred window was set into the far wall, and carved into the stone floor was an enormous smiling face, showing a crazed grin of pointed teeth. This face appeared numerous times around the architecture, and Miles wondered if it was of some significance to the Bodkin.

Wynston quickly sat on the bench and stretched his arms. Miles couldn't take his eyes away from the clusters of glittering stars marking Wynston's dark blue skin.

"See something you like?" Wynston asked, irritably.

"I'm sorry," Miles said. "It's just...they're beautiful."

Wynston retracted his arms and looked them up and down, trying to find whatever it was that Miles saw. "You're not serious."

"I am, though! You look just like the night sky."

"The *what* sky?" Wynston asked.

"Oh, right...the *Nyte* sky," Miles corrected. Nytethorn hadn't been kidding about the proper pronunciation; it seemed as if he'd have to get used to it.

"Well so does every other Nytefolk, but nobody calls Mordeth beautiful."

"Maybe someone should, just to see the look on his face," Miles said.

"So, if you're not from around here, where are you from?" Wynston asked.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me." Miles explained.

"Right then. Sorry I asked," Wynston replied, sourly.

"I can't be positive, but I think I'm from the other side of the stars."

Wynston blinked once, then twice. He craned his neck to look out the

cell window briefly. "We're talking about *those* stars, right? It's not the name of some river or something."

"*Those* stars," Miles agreed.

"Well, you were right. I *don't* believe you," Wynston said, with a quick nod. "But...there is something *odd* about you. You certainly don't look like anyone I've seen before, and I've seen a lot of people."

"So there's a chance I'm right, then?" Miles asked.

"I didn't say *that*. What were you planning to do here, then, if you came from... 'out-of-town', let's say?" Wynston wondered.

"I don't really know. I just kind of ended up here, actually."

"That's life though, isn't it?" Wynston said. "Just a series of ending-up-in-places."

"That's a very wise thing to say," Miles said. It was refreshing to find someone in Nyte that didn't have a mask or a scary coat. "Isn't it great that we're cellmates? Now it'll be even easier for Spricket to come find us."

"First of all," Wynston started, "That Bodkin is *not* escaping his cell this nyte, or the next nyte, or any nyte. Second, even if he *did*..." He stopped himself as something occurred to him, and then just slumped down on the bench. "We don't have to worry, because he won't, and that's that."

"What were you going to say just then?" Miles asked.

"All right, let's say through some complete freak accident that he actually managed it. Where are you going to run? There's nothing but flat land in every direction, and then Mordeth's Phears will find you in no time flat."

"Someone like Mordeth doesn't seem like he'd be afraid of much," Miles said.

"He's not," Wynston replied. "What gave you the impression that he was?"

Miles quickly realized this was another word that didn't translate. "Oh, nothing. But don't you want to be free again? This place is just awful."

"Awful in here, awful out there." Wynston crossed his arms defiantly. "At least I've got something to keep me busy. Going back outside just means wandering from place to place again, and wandering's no way to make a living, trust me."

Miles gestured toward the floor. "What, and this *is*? You've got to be joking! You're not going to tell me that working in a prison is better than doing whatever you want."

"Maybe whatever I want is doing nothing at all. Nothing wrong with that. Besides, I couldn't just leave my blade here, could I? It's just about the only thing to my name, and they confiscated it a while ago. End of discussion, Miles. And tell your Nytekap to leave me alone."

The little Nytekap had crawled down to Wynston's foot, and was investigating his ankle curiously.

"He likes you, is all," Miles said as he picked the Nytekap up. "Let's say I got your blade back, Wynston. Would you want to leave then?"

Wynston closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Look, no offense, but I really don't think you get it. My whole life, I've just sort of ended up in one place after another, and it hasn't been such a fantastic ride. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to catch forty wynx before the next shift."

"Forty...winks?" Miles asked.

"That's a strange noise," Wynston said as he pulled his legs up onto the bench to lie down. "How'd you make it, with your teeth?"

"Forty winx? No...forty wynks? Not that...forty wynx?" Miles said.

"There you go. You really are a strange child."

"Wynx! I like that. I think it'd make a wonderful name for the Nytekap."

Miles said, as he picked his friend up. "Wynx! How do you think it sounds?"
The Nytekap twittered in assent.

"Turn that thing down," Wynston said, rolling over as to face away from the pair.

"You never answered my question," Miles pointed out. Wynston remained silent. "If I could get you your blade back, would you come with me?"

"Don't see why you need me to leave," Wynston said.

"Because I've met nothing but strange and mysterious people since I've got here, and you're the only one that really seems normal so far, you know? Just right."

Wynston shifted uncomfortably. "Um...thanks, I suppose."

"And if you come with me, you'll have a friend."

"Ugh. Don't start on *this* track now. You've got the Nytekap and the Bodkin, don't you? That seems like more than enough friends for one day, don't you think?"

"Just answer me, Wynston. If I got your blade back, would you come with me?"

Wynston remained motionless. "Perhaps I'd consider it."

A tapping sound came from the bars. Miles turned to face Spricket, standing there with a gigantic smile.

"Never thought I could do it, huh?" The Bodkin whispered, spinning a long, black needle between his fingers. "Never underestimate a Bodkin! It's the oldest saying in the book."

"Spricket!" Miles whispered back. "Do you think our lock would be as easy as yours?"

"Easier," Spricket replied as he got to work.

"Oh, here we go," Wynston groaned as he sat up.

"Wynston," Miles asked, "Where do you think they hid your blade after they took it?"

"You can't go after it," Wynston said, shaking his head. "Mordeth threw it in the Phear pens as a chew toy for the things. Miles, tell me you won't go after it."

"But you said that if I got it back, you might..."

Wynston took Miles by the shoulders. "I don't care what I said. You need to promise me you're not going to the Phear pens, or else I'm not letting you leave this cell."

"Sorry, but I don't think you get to be the judge of that," Spricket said as he popped the lock open. "C'mon, kid, if the sourling here wants to stay here and enjoy the scenery, let him. We gotta get going before Mordeth does his rounds."

Miles backed slowly away from Wynston, not taking his eyes off him. "I won't go looking for the pens, but if I happen to bump into them on the way, who knows? Come on, Wynn." The Nytekap hopped back on Miles' shoulder. "I know this isn't goodbye, Wynston. We'll see each other again very soon."

"Don't do something stupid," Wynston pleaded.

"I don't plan to," Miles replied.

As the minutes passed, Wynston's cell began to feel rather small.

He was sure that it wasn't actually getting smaller, although with these Bodkin structures, that was always a possibility. No, it just *felt* smaller, like the world outside was finally beginning to bang against the bars of his window. He hadn't felt like this in a very long time, if ever, and it had something to do with that kid.

Wynston held his right arm up and unwound the wrappings part way. A particularly dense cluster of star-marks sparkled in response to the moonlight from the window. He held his arm up to the bars, and sighed.

He had been called many things throughout his life. But in that long list, something he was fairly certain no one had *ever* called him was beautiful.

But that kid...he wasn't lying, you could tell from his face. That was the first time he'd ever seen a Nytefolk. Perhaps from 'above the stars' was something of a stretch, but there was definitely something...*different* about him.

He began to wonder about the child and Spricket. Would they make it out in one piece? Miles wasn't serious about finding the blade, was he?

"Shoosh," Wynston said out loud, to the voices swarming in his head like stinging Dowts. He stood up and began to pace, hoping it would take the edge off of him, but his worries only intensified. Mordeth wasn't so bad as to throw a child to the Phears, was he? Then again, Turncoats weren't exactly renowned for their compassion.

Wynston's cell door shut with a clank. He looked up to see Mordeth, hulking as ever, twisting a barbed key in the lock.

"Hey whelp, where's the Nytekap boy?" Mordeth asked. "Didn't go exploring, did he?"

"I...I don't know where he went," Wynston stuttered. "He's not my problem, he's *yours*."

"Well put," Mordeth agreed, nodding. "And I always like to think of myself as a problem-solver." He knocked on the bars twice before disappearing down the hallway.

Wynston sat back down on the bench, and worried harder than he'd worried in a long, long time.

For a bumbling and seemingly oblivious fellow, Spricket had an amazing mental map of the facility in his head. He knew which turns to take, which corridors would be dead ends, and which corners to avoid for fear of guards.

"So where to once we leave?" Miles asked, as they hurried down yet another dark passageway.

"Oh, I'll take you up to the nytemare ranch north of here, where I'm from. You'll love it there, with my brother and my grandfather...and it's just so *pretty*," Spricket said, expressing what seemed like a strangely uncharacteristic sentiment.

"So which way is it to the Phear pens?" Miles asked. "I told Wynston I'd get him his sword back so he could come with us."

"That didn't happen to be the tail-end of that conversation I heard, was it?" Spricket asked. "Because if you ask me, that sounded a lot like Wynston was forbidding you from doing just that."

"But I don't think he'll come without it. We can't just leave him here."

"Oh, *yes* we can," Spricket said, looking both ways around the next corner. "Look, I'll miss him too. He was a nice guy, if not a little grumpy. But Miles, buddy, you gotta look out for *you*, and I don't think Wynston is you. You know? But that's just a guess. I mean, I suppose he *could* be you, but then things get *really* confusing."

The sound of footsteps echoed down the hallway. Spricket froze still.

"That's not right," Spricket whispered. "There shouldn't be a patrol here on this hour."

Miles walked in front of Spricket and sat on the floor. "Then it's here where they find me."

"Miles," Spricket whispered as loud as he could without talking, "What are you *doing*? We are *so* close to freedom, and if you get caught, Mordeth will

throw you to the Phears in half a second!"

"That's the idea," Miles said. "I'm not leaving without Wynston, Spricket. Go ahead, get out of here. You can say hi to your family for me."

Spricket stared at Miles in disbelief, took a few steps forward, and then stared at Miles some more. "This isn't over, Miles. I'll come back for you with Spryre, you'll see. And then I'll free you and Wynston, and, and...I'll be back. You just wait and see."

The next second, Spricket was gone, scurrying down the passage almost like a spider.

"Hello, Nytekap boy," Mordeth said, from behind. Wynx made its best growling impression.

"Nice time of nyte, isn't it?" Miles said, with a smile. Mordeth's eyes narrowed. "So, is this when you take me to the Phears? Let's get along with it, then. No point in wasting time."

"Requesting an audience with the Phears?" Mordeth asked, genuinely surprised. He chuckled once. "You're braver than I gave you credit for, Nytekap boy." He picked up Miles by the collar of his shirt with a single arm.

"Bravest piece of meat I ever did see."

Chapter Four

Jailbreak at Half Past Full

"You're in luck," Mordeth jeered as he unlocked the massive, barred door in front of him. "Now's sleeping time for the Phears, so as long as you don't make too much noise, you may not even have to worry..." With one good shove, he pushed Miles right into the door and slammed it behind him.

"...much."

Miles quickly scanned the dimly lit chamber for signs of something moving; nothing yet. He blew a sigh of relief as he sat down on the floor and took Wynx off of his shoulder. "We need to be quiet, okay?" Miles whispered, bringing a finger to his lips. Wynx nodded, wrapping its little pom-pom around the mouth of its mask.

Seeing as how the only illumination in the large cell was some beams of moonlight coming in from the shoddily made ceiling, Miles was afraid to take

any steps in case he'd trip over one of the "Phears", whatever they looked like. Miles inched forward just a little bit, and one of the creatures was courteous enough to roll right underneath a moonlight shaft to answer his question.

At first, Miles thought it looked like a lean wolf or jackal, except instead of fur, there was only hairless, leathery black skin. Its head was missing eyes, ears and a nose, so the only feature of note was a large mouth, filled with gleaming, dagger-like teeth. The more Miles thought about it, the more he realized they didn't really look like wolves at all. And one of these things was gnawing on Wynston's sword somewhere? Miles didn't look forward to that, especially with the bad lighting.

"Wynx, do me a favor," Miles whispered, holding the Nytekap above his head. Don't think you could reach the ceiling up there with your little feeler, could you?"

Wynx coiled his pom-pom thread like a spring, and then shot it up into the ceiling above, hooking on one of the many holes. Miles pulled ever so gently, and some of the ceiling came loose and fell right down with a clatter.

Miles held his breath; the sleeping Phear twitched slightly.

Wynx brought his pom-pom back in an instant, and seemed unwilling to attempt such a risky feat again. The lighting in the room was much better now, however, and Miles could see there were only three Phears in total, and that the one in the back was definitely sitting on something.

Further inspection revealed that the something was a sort of thin metal rectangle, with some stylized skull motifs carved into the metal. On the side of it was a small catch, pulled down the same way one might push the flap down on a toaster to turn the machine on. The device certainly didn't look like a sword, but there wasn't anything else in the room, and perhaps Wynston knew how to make it work.

"Wynx, I need your help again," Miles whispered. The little Nytekap shook its mask furiously; it didn't like where this was going. "It'll be easy, okay? Trust me." Wynx made a sort of high-pitched sighing noise, and then hopped into Miles' hands. "Remember how you almost took that dream from me, a while ago? Grab onto that thing the exact same way."

Wynx hesitated, and then slowly wound its pom-pom thread around the device. Miles put his hands gingerly on the sleeping Phear's side and prepared to push, as lightly as he could.

"Okay, Wynx, pull on three. One...two..."

"Hope it hasn't been too lonely, whelp," Mordeth said, as he unlocked Wynston's cell door. "Brought your Nytekap boy. Don't misplace him again," he warned as he shoved Miles harshly into the cell. Miles was clutching his stomach, with the little Nytekap still sitting on his shoulder.

"My tummy keeps grumbling," Miles said, with a bit of a whine. "Isn't there anything to eat in this place?"

"Not until half past full," Mordeth replied, closing the cell door. "You could always just eat the Nytekap," he said with a chuckle before he disappeared down the corridor.

"Tell me he didn't throw you with the Phears," Wynston said, as soon as Mordeth was out of earshot. "Well, I suppose he didn't, or else an empty stomach would be the least of your problems right now."

Miles leaned back to make sure Mordeth was gone, before reaching underneath his shirt and pulling out his prize. "Ta-da! Bet you haven't seen this in a long time, have you, Wynston?"

Wynston stared at the device for a moment before taking it from Miles with the utmost care. He slapped the catch on the side, which popped up via a

hidden spring. A short, shining blade emerged from the top of the rectangle. "Miles, I..." Wynston gazed at the weapon a little longer, before he looked back up at Miles. His eyes narrowed. "I told you *not* to go get this."

"But now you'll leave, right? It was all worth it in the end."

"The Phears were asleep, then?" Wynston asked.

"Yes, but I don't see what that has to do with..."

"What if they'd been awake? What if this didn't work? You could have gotten seriously hurt, Miles. This wasn't a smart thing to do."

"But..." Miles paused, a little hurt. "...it doesn't matter, because you've got your blade back. We'll escape now! Spricket says he'll come back to rescue us, and then..."

"Are you not listening to what I'm saying?" Wynston snapped. "This is just a stupid piece of pointy metal. But you're *you*, Miles. If something had happened, I never could have lived with myself. Should have just told you no from the start..."

Miles sat on the bench and faced towards the bars. "But you're *you*, Wynston. I'm not as important or as cool as you. So what if something had happened to me?"

"Why are you saying things like that?" Wynston asked, sitting down on the bench next to him. "Listen, I'm not one to go around appraising people's worth, but I can definitely tell you that you are worth *much* more than me. I've got experience with this, I can tell."

"No you can't! You're just saying that," Miles shouted. "You are worth more than me, and that's final."

"Oh, no it is *not*," Wynston retorted. "If I had half a..." Both of them heard footsteps coming from down the hall. "Don't say anything," Wynston said, as he retracted the blade back into its casing and tucked the device under

the wrappings on his right arm. The thing was so thin that Miles could barely tell that it was there at all.

"Kersploosh wants the Nytekap boy to step outside for a moment," Mordeth said, unlocking the cell door once more. "You're more than welcome to watch, whelp."

"Watch what?" Miles asked, Wynx growling from his shoulder.

"Doesn't sit well with Kersploosh that the Phears were asleep. Besides, we need residents to know that escape attempts will *not* be tolerated." Mordeth picked up Miles by his collar once more. "An example needs to be made."

Outside, Miles was thrown to the rocky ground again, a procedure he was becoming quite familiar with. Regardless, he couldn't get Wynston's anger out of his head. What had he done wrong? It's not like he was going to get hurt; this was all a silly dream anyway.

The other prisoners began to gather around Miles in a very large circle, with Wynston directly in front of him. He looked very ill-at-ease, constantly glancing around, nervous about something. Miles wished he hadn't made him so mad.

Kersploosh, the tiny Bodkin woman from before with the glasses, proudly marched outside as well, followed by Mordeth, who tugged at a pair of lively Phears behind him with a couple of chains that served as leashes. The Phears snapped their colossal teeth and scraped their yellowed claws into the dirt.

"As you all might know, your little moron friend Spricket escaped the InCorrectional Facility last nyte, and this little 'yoomin' brat here was his accomplice. Isn't that right, yoomin?"

Miles scowled, as Wynx did his best growling impression again. "And I

served my punishment. I don't see why I'm here."

"Served your punishment?" Kersploosh asked, with a laugh. "You sat in a room full of snoring animals! More of a petting zoo than a punishment. And that's just what we're here to fix. Mordeth!"

Mordeth relinquished his grip on the Phears' chains by a few links, then grabbed hold again. The Phears advanced a few steps towards Miles before standing still. Mordeth did the same thing again, and the Phears strode closer.

"Nice Phear..." Miles said as he slowly began to back away.

Mordeth chuckled as he let go of the chains once more.

One of the Phears lunged forward and pounced into the air; Miles kneeled down and closed his eyes.

The creature never landed. As Miles slowly rose to his feet, he opened his eyes. Wynston stood in front of him, holding the nasty beast by the throat with a single hand.

"I've had enough," Wynston said, tossing the whimpering Phear to the side. "I'm leaving, and I'm taking the boy with me. Any questions?"

"The Nytefolk's lost his mind. Mordeth!" Kersploosh screeched.

"Thought we took away this one's claws a long time ago," Mordeth said, as he trudged up to Wynston, Phears' chains still in hand.

"Just had to grow some new ones," Wynston retorted coldly. His blade sprung from its hidden sheath on his forearm.

Kersploosh tensed. "How did he..."

Mordeth's eyes widened as he figured it out in his head. "Nytekap boy...that little..."

With a quick slice, Wynston severed the Phears' rusty chains. The pair of beasts ran off, howling like mad. Mordeth clenched his hands as he spun the empty chains around his fists, covering his knuckles. "Want to play, whelp?" He

knocked his fists together, causing the chains to spark. "Let's play."

Miles watched as one of the Bodkin prisoners, a short, purple-skinned fellow, picked up a stone and tossed it at Kersploosh.

"The nerve of you little...Mordeth! Make them stop!" Kersploosh barked. But Mordeth was far too caught up in his duel with Wynston. Even Miles was hypnotized as Wynston flipped and somersaulted over Mordeth's mighty punches. For someone who spent a lot of his time sitting in his cell, Wynston was certainly in excellent shape. "*Mordeth!*" Kersploosh screamed once more as more prisoners began joining in the improvised rebellion.

Mordeth took a couple of steps back from his foe and produced a tiny whistle from beneath his coat, which he promptly blew on. A shrill cry cut right through the air.

Five more Phears scrambled out of the main facility, each one baring their oversized teeth. One extended its long, wide tongue, revealing a singular eye in the middle of the tongue. The eye quickly closed as the tongue slid back into the beast's gaping mouth.

"Wynston!" Miles cried, not sure he could outrun that many of the things.

"Afraid I'm going to need a minute," Wynston said, as he ducked another one of Mordeth's surprisingly fast punches.

Just then, Miles noticed a lone Bodkin, standing on the roof of the facility.

He wore what looked like a ragged black blanket, wrapped around, as well as a pair of dark glasses that shielded his eyes. A black bandana covered his mouth, and on the unusual bandana was a picture of a grinning smile, teeth as sharp as the Phears. The little skin Miles could make out was a bright blue, much like Spricket, and to top the bizarre image was the fact that this figure

was holding the largest, pointiest, nastiest pair of garden shears that Miles had ever seen.

“Who in the...” Miles started.

As though he detected Miles’ sight, the figure shrank down, like a spring.

Like a darting snake, his free hand reached inside his black shroud and produced what looked like a serrated, shark-toothed trowel, like the ones Miles’ mother would use to garden, but a lot less pleasant.

With a flick of his wrist, the figure tossed the trowel at the ground about an inch from Mordeth’s feet. Mordeth took a step back and stared at the ground, his eyebrows furrowing.

Wynston took the opportunity to scurry back to Miles, making sure to click his blade back into its sheath by pulling the catch down.

“Gardeners?” Wynston asked, seemingly to himself. “Have no idea what they’d be doing all the way out here. None of the Nytemares we’ve found splitting rocks were particularly valuable...”

“Spricket said he’d come help us,” Miles said. “Maybe it just took him this long.”

The Phears tried to draw closer, but a hail of razor-sharp trowels sank into the earth like arrows. All of the Phears shrank back, whimpering.

“That you, Spricket?” Miles yelled up, towards the roof.

“Mordeth!” Kersploosh cried. “Do something about...”

“*Quiet,*” Mordeth said back. Kersploosh looked as though she’d just been smacked. “The Turncoats do not take orders from you, *you* take orders from the Turncoats. Do not forget that.” Kersploosh began to back away towards a Phear, who snapped their jaws loudly. “And as for you,” Mordeth began, turning back towards Wynston and Miles, “I haven’t let a single inmate escape this facility yet, and I don’t plan to start now.”

The black-garbed figure dropped behind Mordeth without a sound.

“You know what they say,” Miles said, as Wynn x hopped on top of his head. “There’s a first time for everything, right?”

“Miles,” Wynston started, “What do you say we don’t patronize the very angry Turncoat right now? It seems to me he’s having something of a bad day.”

“Is that right, whelp?” Mordeth asked, as he cocked his fist back. “I was just thinking things were starting to look up.”

The mysterious Bodkin grabbed onto his fist from behind, and kept it from going anywhere. Mordeth turned to face his new opponent with his wrath refueled.

“You two, go,” the Bodkin commanded, tersely.

Miles, Wynn x, and Wynston didn’t need to be told twice.

The three of them ran as far as they could from the place, not stopping to catch their breath. Miles couldn’t make it very far before his lungs started to burn, but he expected that. Wynston, on the other hand, seemed to have no trouble running at all, jumping forward in brief, lightning-quick bursts, almost like a grasshopper. Miles couldn’t help but wonder where Wynston found all the energy.

“Wynston, do you think...maybe we could...” Miles stammered, gasping between breaths.

“Whatever you’re asking, no. Mordeth’s probably already got his Phears trained on our scent,” Wynston replied, his voice not sounding strained in the slightest.

Wynn x perked up and twitched slightly. He looked left, then right.

“Wait up!” Miles cried. “Wynn x senses something.”

“He’s a Nytekap, Miles,” Wynston said. “The only reason he senses that

little mask is because it's stitched to his body. What, you think he can hear things?"

"Stop being so grumpy," Miles said. "He hasn't failed me yet. Have you, Wynx?" The Nytekap didn't bother to respond; he just lifted his pom-pom thread up and pointed it to the left. Picking up Wynx and moving him around resulted in the thread being eerily glued to that direction, like the magnetic needle of a compass. "See? He's found something. We're going this way."

"Miles," Wynston started. Just then, the two of them heard a grinding noise, the noise an old washing machine made that couldn't run like it used to.

"And what do you think that is?" Miles asked, running off in Wynx's direction.

"I think that's something we don't need to see for ourselves," Wynston responded.

Over the next hill, Miles could make out a sort of rickety cart, rolling along the horizon. Thick, black exhaust smoked out of the vehicle's behind in a cloud. Atop the cart sat the mysterious Bodkin from before, and behind him sat Spricket.

"Spricket!" Miles yelled across the plain. "Spricket! We're over here!"

"Splendid," Wynston grumbled. "More Bodkin."

The cart began to turn in their direction, as Spricket stood up and waved his arms.

"Get ready to hop on!" He shouted. "Not sure we can start this thing again if we stop it!"

"Is he serious? He's not serious," Wynston said.

"Come on, then! We haven't got much time," Miles said, running to meet the cart. The vehicle pulled closer, and Wynston and Miles were forced to sprint alongside it to keep up.

Wynston deftly somersaulted on top of the cart with no trouble at all; his feats of dexterity were becoming commonplace by now.

“Since when could you move like that?” Spricket asked.

“Now’s not the time. Give me your hand, Miles!” Wynston said, kneeling off the edge with an arm extended. “Come on, I know you’ve got some left!”

“I...can’t...keep...up...” Miles got words out between pants. There was no way he could keep up this pace, much less jump on the thing.

Wynx shot out his pom-pom thread, which quickly wrapped around Wynston’s arm like a rope.

“How in the...” Wynston started, amazed.

With the loudest chirp he’d made yet, Wynx retracted the thread as Miles clutched onto him, catapulting the two of them roughly onto the cart.

“See? I told you I’d come back for ya!” Spricket said, patting Miles on the back. “No Bodkin ever leaves a friend behind. Oldest Bodkin tradition in the book.”

Chapter Five

Spricket and Spryre, Inc.

The Nytemare-powered cart made it another few minutes or so before one of the wheels began to break down, so Spricket said they should probably roll it the rest of the way to the Nytemare ranch. Wynston and the other Bodkin pushed it, while Spricket and Miles walked in front and kept watch for Phears. Wynx sat atop the cart, always happy to have a free ride.

“I’m sorry, I never got your name,” Miles said, turning to face the quiet Bodkin pushing the cart. “Are you related to Spricket?”

“That’s my one and only brother, Spryre,” Spricket explained. “Don’t mind him, he just doesn’t like to talk if he doesn’t have to.”

“That makes you pretty unusual for a Bodkin,” Wynston joked.

“You move pretty unusually for a Nytefolk,” Spryre retorted, quickly. Wynston instantly went quiet.

“So what is it you two do, exactly?” Miles asked, turning to face Spricket once more. “You run some kind of Nytemare garden, or something?”

“My brother here and I are Nytemare gardeners, y’see. Nytemares are a commodity that never go out of business, especially here in the Crag. We Bodkin just can’t get enough of the things! Especially the rare ones. Of course, you have to be agile, cunning, and have little to no regard for your own welfare to harvest the things, which thankfully both me and Spryre have in spades. Ain’t that right, Spry?” No response. “See, even Spryre agrees with me.”

“So you two are gardeners, you said? Where I’m from, gardeners are completely different,” Miles confessed.

“Well, don’t mistake us for Gardeners with a capital G. That’s a whole other animal there; they’re the Gardeners that can bend Dreams and Nytemares to their will, make ‘em do things. But we’re the lowly kind of gardeners, the kind who hunt Nytemares because it’s in our Bodkin blood. Ain’t that right, Spry?” Again, silence. “See, even Spryre agrees with me.”

“We’re here,” Spryre proclaimed.

Miles looked up, and laid his eyes on the strangest building he’d ever seen.

The bottom half of it looked normal enough, like a big, old garage, but the top half was a wire mesh, like a giant colander had been turned upside down and nailed to the structure.

“She’s a beaut, ain’t she? We live here with our granddad Splutch and Cousin Plunk, who’s kind of a handful. But this here’s where we run our business: Spricket and Spryre Inc, Nytemare Specialists.”

“Looks amazing,” Miles said. As he stepped away from the cart, Wynx hopped back onto his shoulder, not wanting to be left behind.

“Should I push this in closer?” Wynston asked.

“Fine where it is,” Spryre responded.

As Miles drew closer, the first thing he noticed was an enormous, trollish Bodkin, about eight feet tall with a squashed nose and huge arms. His brown vest covered his olive-green skin, and fingerless gloves kept him from cutting himself on a razor-edged sickle he held.

“Spricket? Is ‘zat you?” The giant asked, as Miles and his companions walked down the slope of the hill.

“Had a run-in with the Facility down south,” Spricket answered. “You know how they are there. Anyway, here’s a couple of buddies I made along the way. Miles, Wynston, meet Plunk.”

“Pleased to make yer’ acquaintance,” Plunk said, putting his handiwork aside long enough to shake their hands. Miles was half-expecting his bones to be crushed in the giant’s massive grip, but he was gentle as could be. Plunk turned back to Spricket and presented him with what he’d been working on, an unfriendly sickle with a serrated edge. “I sharpened her up for ‘ya, good as new, if not better.”

Spricket took the implement and spun it around his finger a few times, in a way that left Miles amazed that it didn’t slice his hand right off. He tossed it into the air, caught it behind his back, and then flicked his wrist forward.

Thunk. The blade stuck fast in the wooden wall of the shed, where Miles now saw a great many holes and lacerations.

“Not bad, but it needs to be more aerodynamic, you know? I think we should take some weight off the handle, doncha’ think?” Spricket asked his friend, who walked over to the blade and twisted it a few times before

removing it from the wall.

“I s’pose,” Plunk replied, gazing at the sickle with a sort of disdain, as though his efforts had gone unnoticed.

“I think it looks incredible,” Miles said. “Any sickle that can fly through the air like that is certainly one I wouldn’t mind having.” A smile flickered over Wynston’s face, which left Miles curious.

Plunk smiled and patted Miles on the head. “Nice that *somebody* thinks so,” he said, as Wynx flit from Miles shoulder onto the back of Plunk’s palm. “Well look at that! Don’t see too many of them west of the Valley. You’re a brave little guy, aintcha?” Wynx skittered up the length of Plunk’s colossal arm and hopped atop his head, making a seat for himself in the short, stringy hair.

“Miles,” Wynston started. “You should really teach that thing some manners. One of these days, it’s going to jump on someone who’s *really* superstitious, and then you’re going to be in big trouble.”

“Oh, he ain’t never hurt nobody, ‘as he?” Plunk asked, as Wynx hopped from his head into his arms, and then back onto Miles’ familiar shoulder.

“Well, no, but that’s not...fine. Let it do what it wants,” Wynston relented, crossing his arms.

“Speaking of sickles and the like, we’d better trim the Angries, Spricket, right ‘dis minute.” Plunk said as he handed the sickle back to his friend.

“They’ve gotten awful restless since you’ve been gone, and I think they’re just about overdue.”

“Never a dull day for a gardener, huh, boys?” Spricket asked as he spun the sickle again and somehow strapped it to his back. “Listen, I gotta clip some of the Nytemares waiting in the ranch, or else they’re gonna start brushing up against one another, and then they’re gonna get *real* cranky. You fellas care to join in the fun?”

Wynston nodded once. "I'll help where I can."

"You're just trimming them, right?" Miles asked, thinking back to the Nytemares from the forest. They certainly didn't seem very scary. "I've pulled weeds before. It's probably the same thing."

Spricket eyed Miles curiously as he opened the shed door, revealing a rack of farming utensils stapled to the door's back. He took another sickle, as well as a twisted scythe that looked far too long for him to carry comfortably.

"You gonna need a sickle or something, buddy?" Spricket asked, motioning in Wynston's direction.

"I've got my sickle right here," Wynston responded, releasing his blade from beneath the bandages once more.

"Really? Because that looks more like a knife to me. Sickles are *curved*, y'know," Spricket explained as he kicked the shed door shut.

"I *know* what a sickle is," Wynston retorted. "It was *supposed* to be a figure of speech."

"Well we don't have *time* for speeches!" Spricket cried, as he whirled the scythe about himself. "Right now, we've got a whole ranch full of Nytemares in a *really* bad mood. This is crunch time, people!" Wynston just sighed and rolled his eyes.

Spricket walked past Plunk to a pair of tall metal doors leading into the bowl-shaped structure. They were locked at their center by a dizzying array of deadbolts, padlocks, and chain-locks, lots of which had grinning smiley faces etched into their steel.

As Spricket started undoing the locks with incredible agility, he began to speak. "Now, before we go in there, I just need to ask for everyone's safety...no one here is afraid of Nytemares, right?"

"Right," Wynston replied, getting impatient.

“Well...what’s to be afraid of?” Miles asked. “I thought they were just those plants all colored in black. Not all that scary.”

Spricket was in the middle of sliding the last chain-lock across when he froze completely still. He *slowly* turned around to face Miles and took a step towards him.

“You’ve...you’ve never been to a Nytemare ranch, have you?” Spricket asked, with an unusual seriousness that gave Miles the willies.

“No, but it’s just a garden of the things, right? I imagine it’s like a wheat field, or...or like a cabbage patch.”

Spricket scratched his head once, then shrugged as he turned around to finish the lengthy unlocking.

“Well, kid, I don’t know what to tell you to expect...” Spricket pulled the final chain from its socket. “...but it sure ain’t no cabbage patch.”

The doors flew open, and the Nytemares awoke.

An enormous garden spread out before Miles, and in every patch of soil grew a leafy horror more terrible than the last. A Nytemare resembling a giant Venus flytrap, completely black, resided to the left, which stirred upon the doors being opened. Next to it grew a swirling mass of tangled vines, constantly roping and constricting around one another like snakes. Across from that one grew a tree, its bark warped into the image of a scowling face with knots for eyes and briars for teeth. After that one, Miles didn’t even want to see any more of them, and took a nervous step backwards.

Simultaneously, all of the Nytemares *roared*.

“AAAHHH!” Miles screamed, backpedaling as fast as he could, grabbing Wynx from his shoulder and hugging him tight. He toppled to the ground, bringing Wynx with him, and huddled up on the grass beside Plunk.

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa!*” Spricket shoved both of the doors shut and re-

locked all of the mechanisms, wiping the sweat from his brow upon his completion. “Miles, buddy, you *need* to tell me these things *before* I open the door, okay?” Spricket sat down on Plunk’s sharpening rock and exhaled a sharp “pew” of relief.

“Those...those weren’t like the ones I saw before,” Miles stammered, still not releasing the Nytekap, who only nestled further into Miles’ arms as though it would comfort him.

“Well, *dub!*” Spricket exclaimed, tossing his scythe to the ground. “The ones *we* grow are the expensive kind, which is why we can make a killing off their trimmings. You mean no one ever told you about Nytemares?”

Wynston hunched down beside Miles and put a hand on his shoulder. “No one’s told him much of anything about this place. He’s new here, I think.”

“Let me tell you something about Nytemares,” Spricket continued. “They may look big and scary, but the truth is, they can’t actually hurt you.” Miles pulled his head up to gaze at the wiry Bodkin in disbelief. “I’m serious! They can’t actually hurt you, as long as you’re not afraid of them. Hence the question before I threw the gates open. But man, if you’re afraid, *look out.*” Spricket pointed towards the ranch and shook his head. “Fear, they can *smell* it, or *hear* it, or I dunno, whatever sense Nytemares have. And once they know it’s there, it drives them absolutely *nuts*. Which is why if you’re gonna work with them, you *can’t* be afraid of them, okay? So...I’m thinking maybe you should sit round two out.”

“I am *perfectly* fine with that,” Miles said.

“Buckle might like some company upstairs,” Plunk suggested, pulling another sickle from the rack and clanging it against the rock. “You know, if you’d rather not just sit ‘ere. I think I’m going in for a bit of gardening, meself.” Plunk cracked his knuckles, and pulled a pair of oversized garden

shears from the rack. He gave them a couple of practice snips before chuckling to himself.

“Where can I find Buckle?” Miles asked. “That sounds like a good idea.”

Spricket pointed to the other side of the yard, opposite the shed. “To the left of the whole ranch, there’s a staircase leading up. It winds around the whole thing, though, so don’t look down, or else you’re gonna see all your favorite Nytemares wriggling about below. Got it?” Miles nodded as Spricket jumped off the rock and hefted his scythe.

“Okay, boys, whaddaya say we go in there and show those Nytemares what a Gardener’s made of?” Plunk made a sort of war whoop, while Wynston just stood there and drummed his fingers against his blade.

Miles crept around the side of the building and found the staircase, made of more bent wires and probably not very safe. Wynx leaped off of Miles and onto each step in turn, going about five up before turning back around and swaying back and forth, as if to an imaginary tune in its head. Miles wondered if the little Nytekap was trying to show him there was nothing to be afraid of. Certainly a kind gesture, if that’s what it was, Miles thought.

He climbed the stairs one by one, both hands firmly around the handrail, and every few steps Wynx was waiting for him, just sort of bobbing up and down. Miles finally ascended enough steps to be above the ranch and alongside the mesh, which meant looking down would show all the Nytemares and their horrific forms.

On cue, Wynx scrambled back onto Miles’ shoulder and wound his pom-pom around Miles’ eyes several times, creating a sort of makeshift blindfold.

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Wynx,” Miles said as he continued up the stairs slowly, making sure to feel his way around with his hands. “You know, the more time I spend with you, the more I’m certain that you’re not annoying.

I'm sorry for that fight we had from before." Wynx just made his usual twittering noise, and several more steps later, he unfurled his thread from around Miles, who could now see where he was.

The final step gave way to the roof of the entire ranch, and through a series of planks, a sort of viewing platform had been constructed atop the entire place. Sitting on the platform, on a big blue armchair, was a Knee-High whose skin was brown and speckled, almost like a potato. He wore a pair of threadbare suspenders over a black-and-blue striped shirt, and his eyes were stuck to the sky through a pair of enormous binoculars, held in place by a rusty tripod nailed to the platform.

Miles was about to take a step forward when he suddenly looked down.

Ready to avert his gaze at a second's notice, he was instead somewhat fascinated by what he saw. Spricket was spinning like a tornado, his long scythe absolutely shredding the writhing mass of vines. Plunk's shears were snapping the branches off the tree like matchsticks, and Wynston had actually climbed up the back of the giant flytrap and was shucking leaves off its head with his trusty blade. The Nytemares didn't seem so terrifying this time, not with his friends around.

"Quite a spectacle, aren't they?" The Bodkin from the chair spoke, prompting Miles to look up at him. He hadn't even removed his eyes from his binoculars.

"Yes...yes, they are," Miles agreed, taking care to step on the path of nailed boards that led to the platform. Surrounding the Bodkin were odd little devices whose purposes Miles couldn't possibly surmise. One was a fan, blown by the wind, its base secured to some whistle covered in dust. Even stranger still was the three-spouted teapot resting by the Bodkin's feet. "Those are some interesting...*things*, you have there," Miles said as he approached the Knee-

High.

“Well, what’s a Gizmologist without his gizmos? Not much of a Gizmologist at all, that’s what,” the Bodkin replied, with a slow, careful, wise sort of voice that Miles hadn’t learned to expect from a Bodkin. “The name’s Buckle,” the Bodkin said, extending a hand as he finally pulled his baggy eyes from the binoculars. “I’m the owner of this here piece of land, and the resident granddad. You must be someone Spricket picked up somewhere, I presume?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Miles confirmed. “If you don’t mind my asking, what exactly is a Gizmologist? I’m new around here, you see.”

Buckle pulled a second cushion from underneath the armchair and laid it down beside the tripod, waving towards it to invite Miles for a seat. “Nytfolk like to use the word ‘engineers’ to describe them, but the truth is, engineers solve problems. If there were a river that people needed to cross, engineers would figure out how to build a bridge across it, correct?” Miles just nodded, as did Wynx. “Gizmologists would instead build little ships of wood and paper and race them to the other side. And if one of them accidentally discovered how to cross the bridge while they’re at it, all the better. We never used to solve problems, at least not until the Bodkin King came along.” Buckle picked up the strange teapot with his feet and passed it to Miles. “See that? That’s the symbol of our office. Completely impractical, but utterly entertaining. That’s what Gizmology is all about. Then the Bodkin King started the CGP.”

“What’s that?” Miles asked as he put the teapot down beside him. Wynx poked his pom-pom down one of the spouts.

“The Constructive Gizmology Project. The Bodkin King figured that if all these Gizmologists were as smart as they claimed to be, then they could figure out real problems. And truth is, they did. But after the incident...the Bodkin King locked himself away, and the CGP dried up with him.”

“Incident?” Miles asked.

“That’s a longer story for a longer nyte. Did I miss your name?”

“Miles.”

“Miles, of course. And where did you say you were from?”

Miles looked at Wynx, as though an answer would come from him.

Wynx just stared back. “That’s a difficult question. I can give you the real answer, which you won’t believe, or a fake answer, which sounds better.”

“The truth *always* sounds better,” Buckle replied.

Miles took a deep breath, and then exhaled. “I’m not 100% sure on this, but...I think I’m from the other side of the stars.”

Buckle leaned back in his armchair, stared up at the stars, and twitched his nose left, and then right. “From beyond the stars, you say? That’s quite a long way. How do you plan on getting back?” Buckle asked, not a single hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“I’m...not completely certain, actually.” Miles admitted, petting Wynx on the head as he spoke. “I was hoping I’d bump into someone who could tell me, but everyone just thinks I’m crazy. You’re a Gizmologist, right? Is it possible to go back up there, somehow?”

Buckle made a “hmm” noise, followed by rubbing his chin, and then tapping his nails against the binoculars. “I actually don’t know, but it’s an excellent question. Not a question for a Gizmologist, though. You’d be better off asking the Bodkin King himself, to be quite honest. He’s the cleverest Bodkin that the Crag ever saw.”

“Really?” Miles asked, his hope rekindled. “Do you think he’d know a way for me to go back home?”

“He’s already been around the world once before. If there’s a way in Nyte back to your home, I promise you, the Bodkin King’s seen it, walked on it,

and probably lived there for a month.” Buckle began shaking his head, making a clicking noise with his tongue. “But the Bodkin King doesn’t do much of anything anymore. He’s stowed himself away in his keep, and doesn’t talk to people like he used to. Still, though, I should think he’s worth at least a visit.”

“Maybe if I brought a Bodkin with me, he’d soften up,” Miles thought out loud.

“Maybe so, but it won’t be *this* Bodkin,” Buckle said, readjusting his suspenders. “My place is right here, on top of my ranch, watching for the Hoaps.”

“Watching for the what?” Miles asked.

“You know, the Hoaps. Pesky little flyers, they squirm right in through the wires and gobble up the Nytemares for lunch. That’s why I’m up here, with these here What’s-That-Over-Theres. Got to let the boys know if Hoaps are on the way.”

Miles secretly enjoyed the creative name for the binoculars. “And that’s all you’re up here watching for? Is those Hoaps?”

“Well, remember, we’ve got the stone and fences and all that, which works splendid on Phears and Rayjes and other nasty beasts, but all that won’t do a thing against the Hoaps.”

“And why’s that?” Miles asked.

“Because, Miles, only Hoaps can fly.”

Miles looked up into the starry night sky as he considered Buckle’s words. “Hey, Buckle, you said only Hoaps could fly.”

“That’s right,” Buckle said.

“So what’s *that* thing?” Miles pointed up to a little dot in the distance, zipping about wildly like it was out of control.

“I haven’t got a clue,” Buckle admitted as he put his eyes up against his

binoculars once more. “Confounded contraption...” He slapped the binoculars in the side a few times, until one of the lenses popped out with a *sproing*. “Old Gizmologist standby,” Buckle explained. “It’s not really a gizmo unless it’s got something that goes ‘hiss’, ‘sproing’, or ‘kablooie’.”

Miles couldn’t take his eyes off the dot, which had finally stabilized and now hung still in the air. Suddenly, a great cloud of black smoke billowed out from the dot, also just sitting in the air as though it were stuck there. The vapor began to whirl and turn, and before Miles knew it, it had taken the shape of a big arrow, pointing directly at where Miles was standing.

“What’s that mean, do you think?” Miles asked, as he picked up Wynx.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it. I think you’d best be getting downstairs, Miles. I’ll come with you,” Buckle said as he hoisted himself from his armchair and picked up the fan, still attached to the whistle.

Wynx began to tremble, and without a second thought, flung himself inside of Miles’ shirt and stayed there, quivering.

“Wynx? What’s gotten into you?” Miles tried pulling him out, but it was no use.

“Miles, step back,” Buckle said.

“Why, what’s the...”

“Step *back*, Miles,” Buckle commanded, this time with greater urgency.

Miles looked up to come face to face with the new scariest creature he had seen in Nyte.

By the stairs perched an amorphous blob of blackness, almost like a bubble of ink. At its center was a mask carved of wood, with one of the most anguished expressions Miles had ever seen. Its face was frozen in a constant scream, a picture of agony and despair

Appendages that could pass for arms began to form at the creature’s

sides, and its shape elongated until it was no longer a blob, but a long and serpentine shadow, with multiple limbs guiding the creature across the mesh.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Buckle said, as he handed the whistle to Miles, his hand shaking. “Blow into that whistle as *hard* as you can, all right? Like you’re blowing out the biggest candle you’ve ever seen.”

Miles did as he was told, hoping that whatever plan Buckle had come up with would save them from the dark horror on the other side of the roof.

The blades of the fan began to spin faster and faster, until Buckle had the fan pointed directly at the creature.

“And...*now*,” Buckle whispered, as he pulled the hose connecting the two objects right out of the fan.

The fan flew off of its base, like some kind of buzzsaw, and lodged itself solidly in the mask of the aggressor.

The creature pawed wildly at its face for a moment, and then dissolved into a puddle of black that slithered away as fast as it could.

“What *was* that thing?” Miles asked, gasping for breath.

“*That* was a Shade,” Buckle responded, twisting a screw on the side of what used to be the fan.

At the bottom of the stairs, Spricket was twirling his scythe dramatically, while Plunk scratched his head and yawned.

“You didn’t happen to see any Shades about, did you?” Buckle asked.

“Well, *saw* one, anyway,” Spricket replied, stopping his scythe’s motions with a hand. “That Wynston guy sure doesn’t mess around. One second, we’re all like ‘Oh no! It’s a Shade!’, and the next second, Wynston’s already behind it and the thing’s a goner.” Spricket poked at two pieces of wood on the ground with his foot. “This here’s what’s left of it.”

Buckle gingerly picked the fragments off the grass and turned them to face Miles; they were two halves of another mask, this one also howling in pain.

“They look so sad,” Miles commented, as Buckle propped the halves up against the shed.

“It’s an old tradition among Gardeners who get into Shadecrafting,” Buckle said. “They believe that the more pained the face looks, the stronger the Shade. I think it’s complete pillowwillow, but I’m also not in the business.”

“You think it’s complete...” Miles repeated.

“Pill-o-will-ow.” Plunk spoke each syllable slowly. “An old Bodkin word for something that’s all made up.”

“That Wynston fellow you mentioned,” Buckle said, looking both ways. “Where’d he get off to?”

Spricket snickered as he leaned on his scythe. “He took off to ‘secure the perimeter’ or something. Worried about him? Honestly, I’m more worried about the Shades right now. As soon as they breathe near him...*shing!*” Spricket tried to make a slashing sound as he swung a sickle from his back. “Of course, that’s if Shades breathed, which I’m pretty sure they don’t. Hey, Miles, you picked up Wynston in the Facility, right?”

“Yep. Found him in my cell, and convinced him to come along.”

“Funny...” Spricket wiggled his lower jaw back and forth. “You know, Nyttefolk don’t move the way your pal does. They’re not pushovers or anything, don’t get me wrong, but moves like *that*...you only see that with Laifkin.”

“Laifkin...they’re something like the Bodkin, I imagine.”

All three Bodkin present turned their heads toward Miles with the most bewildered faces Miles had seen yet.

Buckle cleared his throat. “Miles, think of the farthest thing you can from the Bodkin. Different in every way, every attitude, every tiny bit of stuff

that makes up their entire being. Think of that different thing, and then try to make it a little...different. Whatever you're thinking of right now, that's a Laifkin." Buckle turned to his companions and smiled. "You know, it's a good thing he made that mistake here instead of the other way around, in front of a Laifkin."

"The Laifkin wouldn't like that at all, no they wouldn't," Plunk agreed.

"I'm sorry," Miles said. "I didn't mean to offend anyone."

"What, you apologizing to *us*?" Spricket asked, surprise in his voice.

"What did I tell you before about taking things seriously? We're the *Bodkin*! We couldn't get insulted if you paid us! Furthermore..."

Before Miles had realized it, Wynston was now standing behind Buckle, his twin-tailed scarf blowing in the cold breeze.

"Hello," Wynston said.

Buckle almost jumped in fright, but upon seeing it was Wynston, he just clutched his chest and sat down on the ground, taking deep breaths. "You're a quiet one, aren't you?"

"Didn't mean to startle," Wynston replied. "There's more of them, on their way here now. I dispatched a couple in the forest, but the rest should be here any minute."

Buckle chewed on the inside of his lip as he pondered something, while Spricket slapped Plunk on the shoulder. "Hey, you know what I think it's time for?"

Plunk looked confused at first, but began to clap his hands as the answer dawned on him. "Is it...is it time for the Weed-Whacker?"

Spricket closed one eye and tilted his head to the side as he gazed up at the moon. "I'd say...yes sir, definitely Weed-Whacker time."

Plunk hopped up and down, a maneuver rather silly looking for

someone his size.

“Weed-Whacker! Weed-Whacker! Oh, this is my *favorite* time!” Plunk yanked the shed door right open and dove into the darkness beyond the entrance, returning with a device that looked like a giant sledgehammer with dozens of holes covering the hammerhead.

Plunk chuckled as he twisted a knob on the handle; a bunch of forks, knives, and other pointed objects sprung from the head and locked into place.

“The ‘Weed-Whacker?’” Wynston asked, incredulously. “You mean to tell me you use that thing for cutting hedges?”

“Hedges, rocks, walls...whatever gets in our way,” Spricket responded. “Why? You got a problem with that?”

“Well, no, but I just wanted to make clear that if all of you wanted to get somewhere safe, now would be the time. I’m not expecting you to jump out in front of a pack of Shades.”

Spricket grabbed hungrily from the rack, until razor-edged trowels were clenched between all his fingers. “Who do you think we are, sissies? We’re *Gardeners!*”

Moments later, the company was prepared for battle.

Plunk gave his Weed-Whacker a couple of swings, each one generating a *whoosh* of air. Spricket had all his trowels holstered at his waist, his sickles crossed behind his back, and his scythe in his spidery hands. Buckle was holding a pistol that reminded Miles of colonial guns he had seen in history books, although this one apparently shot Nytemare seeds instead of bullets. Wynston just crouched down to the ground, one hand on his arm, his blade still in its home.

“Where should I be standing?” Miles whispered to Wynston, hunching

beside his ear.

“Behind one of us, preferably me.”

“Why you?”

“Because I’ll make sure you’re safe,” Wynston responded, a little louder.

“What, the kid doesn’t think he’s safe with *us*?” Spricket asked, spinning the scythe around his own neck.

“If he thinks that, he’s even smarter than I thought,” Buckle added.

Spricket caught his scythe and frowned. “Hey! What’s *that* supposed to...”

“*Quiet*,” Wynston said, his eyes staring dead ahead.

“How come you’re always interrupting *me*?” Spricket continued, with no regard for Wynston’s orders whatsoever. “I’m beginning to think you don’t like me, you know that?”

Another Shade darted forth from the trees, zigzagging from left to right so as to evade possible attack.

Buckle fired his pistol once, and then twice. The Shade stopped moving, and melted beneath the bristly grass.

“Pretty good aim, for someone out of practice,” Spricket commented.

“Those didn’t hit,” Wynston and Buckle said, almost simultaneously.

Darting forward in quick leaps, Wynston dove towards the spot where the Shade fell. His blade ejected as he rose it into the air for a strike; it stayed there as his eyes widened.

“It’s not here. Everyone, stay alert,” he warned as he made his way back to their defensive line.

A curtain of black flew into the air as the Shade pounced from behind them. Plunk spun on his heel and swung the Weed-Whacker like a baseball bat. An earsplitting crack sounded as the giant weapon pulverized the Shade’s mask

into splinters. Its inky body evaporated into a black mist.

“They’re coming for *you*, Miles,” Wynston said, pointing at him with his blade. “Make no mistake, you’re the target. Don’t ask me why.”

“Why do you think they’re coming after him?” Spricket asked. Wynston closed his eyes, breathed slowly, and then opened them again, in what appeared to be an attempt not to strangle Spricket on the spot.

“Regardless, we’re getting you out of here. Get in the shed,” Wynston commanded, as he threw the shed doors open. “You’re much safer in one spot that we can protect, and this way, we can...”

“No,” Miles objected, shaking his head.

“What was that?” Wynston asked, his tone indignant.

“I’m not going to just stand back and let all of you do all the fighting. I can help out too! If Spricket lent me one of his sickles, I bet I could...”

Wynston slammed his blade against the door, creating a loud clang.

“This isn’t a *game*, Miles. Get in the shed, there’s probably more of the things on their way as we speak. We don’t have time for this.” Miles glared at the shed and gritted his teeth. He was sick of feeling so *helpless* in these situations, needing to be protected all the time. He didn’t want to be such a constant burden on all of his newfound friends. Wynston, sensing Miles’ hesitation, walked up to him and kneeled down, so he could speak to him eye to eye.

“I’ll go in there with you, okay? You won’t have to be alone.”

“I just...I just want to *help* for once,” Miles confessed.

“You helped me get out of that Facility back there, remember?”

“I didn’t really do anything,” Miles said. “You could have fought your way out of there anytime you wanted.”

“True, but actually getting off that lousy bench was where I needed the

help, and that's exactly where you came in. And that's why I can't let you get hurt, Miles, and that's why I need you to do me an enormous favor and *get in that shed*. Alright?" Miles hadn't thought of it that way before. He nodded once and started walking towards the shed.

"You know, Wynston, you're pretty good at making people feel better."

"Yeah, well don't get used to it," Wynston replied as he followed after him and motioned towards the Bodkin with his blade. "You three, lock this up after we're inside, got it? Nothing gets in."

"Right-o," Thudge said, with a quick salute.

The shed looked much smaller on the outside than it actually was; part of it had been dug into the ground, to make room for countless racks, each sporting an array of "gardening" tools and weapons that were so sharp that Miles felt uneasy just looking at them. Wynx ran his pom-pom along one of the scythes, and then pulled it back quickly, as if he'd been pricked.

"I'm thinking maybe the Shades aren't after me at all," Miles said. "Wynx here seems as likely a guess as I am." The little Nytekap straightened up the way he did whenever he knew he was being talked about.

"Right, a pack of Shades came all the way to a ranch in the middle of nowhere for a *Nytekap*," Wynston retorted, heavy with sarcasm. Wynx's posture drooped sadly. "Here you are, going on about how you come from the other side of the stars, not making a whole lot of sense, and then here's the Shades, coming out of nowhere and closing in on a fairly remote location, which doesn't make very much sense. I just think that a bunch of things that don't make sense being connected would make...well, a lot of sense."

"About that, I heard of someone who might be able to help. The Bodkin King's supposed to be the cleverest Bodkin around, so I think we should pay

him a visit when we leave the ranch. He might know something about how to get back to wherever I'm from." Wynston let out a small laugh as he took a saw-toothed cleaver from the wall and spun it deftly between his fingers.

"Sort of like saying he's the sharpest spoon in the drawer, isn't it?" Wynston flipped the blade back onto the rack. "I mean, I've heard the stories too, but he's not in much of a mood for visitors these days. And don't forget, Miles, you're dealing with *Bodkin*. They're professional lunatics."

"I don't think Buckle's a lunatic," Miles said.

"Well...all right," Wynston conceded, "I'll admit that he seems to have his head screwed on tighter than most of them. Just don't get your hopes up, is all I'm saying."

"And you were being so good at staying positive," Miles joked, with a smile.

"Told you not get used to it, didn't I?" Wynston replied.

A loud banging sounded from the door, jangling the locks.

"With all due respect," Spricket's squawk sounded from outside, "these Shades aren't getting any nicer, and there's more of 'em coming. Wouldn't mind a little slicey-dicey action right now." Wynston put one hand on the locks before turning back to face Miles.

"You'll stay in here, right? I won't be gone long." Miles and Wynx nodded in unison. "Good. Don't do anything foolish." Wynston opened the doors swiftly and closed them just as fast.

A split second after, a Shade detached itself from the shadows of the ceiling and slithered onto the crack between the doors, cementing them shut with its own oily form.

"Wynston!" Miles cried out, but it wasn't of any use. The moment the Shade had sealed the door, all sounds from outside had gone dead quiet, and

Miles imagined the silence went both ways. Wynx hid behind Miles' back, grabbing to his shoulder with the pom-pom, quivering in terror.

Miles grabbed the cleaver Wynston had been playing with and held it in front of him with both hands; he could see its tip shaking in his trembling grip.

"You...you stay *back*," Miles warned.

A second Shade dropped from above, almost right in front of him. Miles fell straight down, and scurried back as fast as he could, keeping his weapon pointed at the Shade the entire time.

The second Shade, with a mask that wore a miserable frown, slithered up close as a part of itself took the form of a wavering arm. It snatched the blade from Miles' grip with a single swipe, causing Miles to jump in fright and slide back even further, until he could feel the rack behind him. The Shade idly chipped at the ground with the blade in an almost experimental way, like a child playing with a toy they hadn't quite figured out yet. After a few moments, it merely tossed the cleaver to the side and set its terrifying stare once more on Miles. The arm slowly began to move forwards, its inky fingers spreading as if intending to grasp. Miles pushed himself against the rack and looked up, hoping to find some kind of weapon.

Instead, he saw a familiar white mask, staring back down at him.

"Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s! We seem to run into each other in the *oddest* places," Nytethorn said, the rest of his body somehow inside of the wall. The Shade peered up curiously at the newcomer.

"Do something!" Miles yelled, too afraid at the moment to enjoy the reunion.

"A capital idea," Nytethorn said. A number of twisting vines, black as the Shades themselves, arced out of the wall and wrapped around the Shade like ropes. The creature tried to morph its shape this way and that to escape,

but more of the lashes kept appearing, until Miles couldn't even distinguish between Nytethorn's vines and the Shade anymore.

The mesh swung this way and that, until all of them unfurled in an instant, throwing the startled Shade into an adjacent rack. It slithered in a circle repeatedly, as if completely unsure what to do, and then melted into a puddle which crept to the door, colliding into the other Shade along the way. The two of them seemed to writhe against one another, and then both of them disappeared.

Nytethorn pulled his form through the rest of the wall as though it were air, his vines retracting slowly back beneath his pitch-black cloak. One of them peeked back out again to readjust his hat, but it vanished just as quickly.

"You just seem to find trouble one way or the other, don't you?" Nytethorn asked, facing Miles. "Leave you alone for less than a day, and look what happens. Suppose I'll just have to get better at this saving-the-day business."

"It's a good thing you got here when you did!" Miles said. "Otherwise, that Shade might have gotten me, and...and...and I'm honestly not sure what it would have done. I mean, if it had wanted to hurt me, I'd think it would have just done it, right? But instead, it's almost like it wanted to *take* something..."

"Just as observant as ever, I see. And how'd our favorite Nytekap hold up?" Nytethorn asked, peering over Miles' shoulder. Wynx zipped right back up for inspection.

"Not so well. Poor little guy can't stand them. Not that *I* can either, but they really seem to rub him the wrong way."

"They have that effect on most things in Nyte, I'm afraid. Shame you had be introduced to them so soon. How's the sightseeing been going otherwise?"

“Quite an adventure, actually. I got captured by this giant Bodkin, and put in this Facility, where I met this great Nytefolk, and...well, it’s a story.”

“I’d love to hear it at some point. In fact, I think that’s the great Nytefolk right now.”

Wynston kicked the shed doors open, swinging them both out with a *bang* as they struck the inside wall.

“We’ve scared off the last of them, Miles, so we should probably...” Wynston stopped in the middle of his sentence, as his eyes rested on Nytethorn and simply stayed there. “I, uh, don’t believe we’ve met...”

“You wouldn’t happen to be a ‘great Nytefolk’, would you?” Nytethorn asked, in his usual irreverent tone.

“I’m a Nytefolk, at least,” Wynston responded. He walked slowly forward, his blade still outside its mechanism. “Miles, who is this?”

“His name is Nytethorn, and he’s an old friend of mine. Well, not *that* old, but the oldest one I’ve got here. He’s safe, I promise.” Miles’ disclaimer did little to settle Wynston’s nerves. He just kept walking to Miles until he put one hand on his shoulder, his stare still fixed on Nytethorn. “Oh, and Nytethorn here can tell you I’m not crazy! He knows I’m from the other side of the stars.”

“Is that right,” Wynston said, uneasily. Nytethorn turned from Wynston to Miles, then back to Wynston again.

“From the other side of the stars? Complete pillowwillow! Is he always like this?” Nytethorn asked.

“Afraid so,” Wynston said, no less tense than before.

“Hey! Don’t you turn people against me like this!” Miles exclaimed.

“Well, let me ask you, O great Nytefolk. Where do *you* suppose he’s from?” Nytethorn asked, a vine snaking out from beneath his shroud briefly before creeping back in. Wynston watched this happen with one eyebrow stiffly

raised.

“Certainly not from around here, anyway,” Wynston said.

“Correct! Be thankful, Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s, that you have chanced upon a guardian both great *and* wise.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Wynston jeered, finally sliding his blade back beneath the wrappings. “Anyways, come on, Miles, we should help the Bodkin outside with a couple of things before we think about leaving.”

“Leaving already? And things were just starting to get interesting here. Oh well, I suppose it’s all for the better. You’re going to have to try to stay one step ahead of those nasty Shades, after all, and *worse*.”

“Do *you* know something about the Shades?” Wynston asked, quite serious.

“Hm...they’re about *this* high when standing upright,” Nytethorn described, as a vine poked out to illustrate his point, “and they’ve got these bodies like black jelly, and they make for *terrible* party guests.”

“Don’t get funny with me. I’m not in the mood for funny right now,” Wynston threatened. “You know what I meant. About *those* Shades, the ones coming after Miles.”

“Oh, you were talking about *those* Shades. You’ll just have to be more specific next time. And Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s over there seems to have a pretty good bearing on the situation all by himself, so I wouldn’t worry. Plus, he’s got you and the Nytekap around, which seems to be enough most of the time. I imagine just now was a rare exception.”

“Just now?” Wynston asked, urgently. “Miles? What happened?” Miles knew that telling Wynston about the Shades would just make him angry at himself for not being there in time, so he decided against it.

“Nothing, really. Almost brushed up against some of the sickles, was

all.”

“Oh...” Wynston replied. “Well, try to be more careful.”

Nytethorn watched Miles for a moment, thinking something; Miles could tell. He hoped Nytethorn would decide to play along.

“Keep our boy safe, will you, great Nytefolk? He’s stronger than he lets on.”

“The name is *Wynston*,” Wynston explained.

“And you’ll stick around too, won’t you?” A vine crept out and patted Wynx on the head. “Keep him in one piece.”

“Why don’t we just ask the Bodkin outside to watch me too, while we’re at it?” Miles asked, annoyed.

“That’s not a terrible idea. But you know, Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s, I’m just asking them to keep protecting you so that way, *you* can keep protecting *them*.” A vine that had snuck behind Wynston stretched above him and pointed straight down. Miles got the idea, happy Nytethorn had recognized what he’d done, and nodded. Detecting the motion, Wynston looked up, but Nytethorn retracted just in the nick of time. “Besides, I’ll try to make a point of being around more from now on. I hadn’t expected things to be moving along this quickly, but you know what the Bodkin say: better to be ten steps ahead than ten steps afoot! Get it? Heads and feet? I hear it’s the oldest Bodkin phrase in the book.”

Miles and Wynston exchanged glances; when they had both looked forward again, Nytethorn was gone.

“Where’d he go?” Wynston asked, his eyes darting around the room.

“That’s just his thing,” Miles said, shrugging. “I think he prides himself on being very mysterious.”

“Mysterious is one word for it,” Wynston replied.

Miles and Wynston helped Spricket, Plunk, and Buckle with some minor repairs around the ranch, with mostly consisted of pulling Spricket's throwing sickles out of various surfaces. After the work was done, Buckle had Plunk wheel a bizarre, four-wheeled wagon out of the shed, which had an odd metal bowl fastened to a cylinder on one end.

"Figure you two are off to see the Bodkin King, right?" Buckle asked. "This here's an old nytemare cart, powered by burning nytemares in the tank right there. It's not too fast, but it beats walking, and it'll get you to the next big city before the next new moon. Either of you ever heard of Nytevale?"

"Where the Great Gardeners' Games are held," Wynston answered. "Gets a lot of attention right around this time."

"Turns out it's that time of year again, so if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to ask you two to deliver a crate of prepared nytemares to a shop over in Nytevale. Not too much to ask, is it?"

"Of course not," Miles said. "Especially after all the help."

"Splendid! I'll have Plunk get the supplies, then, and I'll get you the information on the shop."

"You know..." Spricket walked forward, and slapped a hand down on Miles' back. "This was a lot of fun, kid, I gotta admit. It's not every day you meet someone as gifted at attracting trouble as you. There's a real career in that, if you're ever interested."

"Thanks, Spricket. I'll remember that."

"More importantly, remember what I told you before, about not taking things so seriously, or else you'll end up like *this* guy!" Spricket pointed at Wynston, who regarded Spricket's bony finger with a cold indifference. Usually, Miles had grown to expect either an icy sigh or a roll of the eyes or *something*,

but this time, Wynston just stared back.

“That’s right, Miles, you could end up like *me*,” Wynston said, gravely.

“Um...I didn’t mean it like however you’re taking it, buddy,” Spricket reassured, slapping Wynston on the shoulder. “You’re a real good guy, one-of-a-kind, and I mean that. And you know I don’t mean almost *anything*.”

“Got *that* right,” Wynston agreed, with a wry smile.

“See?” Spricket shouted. “*There* it is!”

After saying their goodbyes, Buckle put enough nytemares in the tank to last them to Nytevale, according to his calculations. Miles thought that sounded good, but Wynston took some more, just in case.

Before long, the nytemare cart was happily puttering down the path, rattling angrily every once in a while. Steering was accomplished via a lever in the middle of the cart, which Wynston would pull in whichever direction they needed to go in. Miles put Wynx on the side of the cart, so he could watch the scenery go by.

“Miles spelled M-i-l-e-s, huh? What was that all about?” Wynston asked, as he steered the cart around a large dream, a tree that had star-shaped, softly glowing leaves.

“Where I’m from, that’s how you spell Miles. As far as I can tell, you spell that word the same way here too, but other words are different. Like...like Nyte. Where I’m from, you say ‘night.’” Miles pronounced it slowly.

“There it is again! Those strange noises,” Wynston said, sitting back down. “So when I hear those weird sounds, you’re just saying something the way it’s said where you’re from?”

“That’s right. And there doesn’t seem to be any order to it; random words are just...*different* here. It’s strange.”

“And this Nytethorn character, he can hear both? I don’t know if I trust him.” Wynston said, his eyes now on Wynx. “He seems like he knows a lot more than he’s willing to tell.”

“I don’t know if that’s true, or if that’s just the image of himself that he likes to have. Either way, I think he’s mostly harmless.”

“You’re very perceptive about people,” Wynston observed. “Like back at the ranch, when Spricket wouldn’t compliment that Plunk fellow on his sickle. You felt bad, so you went ahead and said something nice anyway. That’s a very rare gift, you know. Much more valuable than all the sword skills in the world.”

“Maybe so,” Miles said, “but it doesn’t look as cool.”

“No,” Wynston replied, “I suppose it doesn’t.”

Chapter Five

The Great Gardeners’ Games

As they drew closer and closer to Nytevale, the Dream trees that had begun to speckle the land disappeared, and dusty paths gave way to cobbled streets. Before long, Miles could make out the tops of twisting towers, bent strangely at their midsection, peeking out over the horizon. Nytevale looked impressive, but it really seemed to be more of a large town than a city.

“Doesn’t look like a very big city,” Miles commented.

“Well, aren’t we picky?” Wynston said, as he punched the tank on the cart to keep it going.

“I didn’t say I didn’t *like* it,” Miles corrected, standing up in the cart

slowly to regain his balance. “It’s just, where I’m from, cities look a lot bigger than that. And the buildings stretch on and on, farther than the eye can see, all made out of steel and glass.” Wynston stared at Miles as he patted Wynx on the head, sitting there by his side, asleep. The two had begun to grow on each other.

“You really *aren’t* from around here, are you?” Wynston asked.

“What, because you never believed me before?” Miles asked back, defensively.

“No, I always believed you, because I don’t think you could be making all of this up,” Wynston said, as he picked Wynx up by the pom-pom and plopped him in Miles’ hands. “It’s just *strange*, is all, to think that you’ve come from someplace else, someplace that *isn’t* Nyte. Because that’s all I’ve ever really known.”

“It’s not *that* strange,” Miles said, sitting back down. “Just think of me as an alien, from space.”

“Think of you as a *what?*”

“You know, an alien, like from another planet or a star, or something. You’ve never looked up at the stars and wondered what else was out there?” Wynston leaned back, resting his back on the side of the cart, and peered straight up.

“No...no, I really haven’t. I don’t spend my time thinking about those sorts of things.” Wynston confessed.

“Oh, I spend almost *all* of my time thinking about it!” Miles said. “And thinking about if monsters are real and are just very good at hiding, and whether or not animals can talk, and if my parents fight crime and just don’t tell me. If I didn’t think about those things...everything would just seem so *boring*.” Wynston’s mouth curled into a sort of half-smile.

“Well, now you know what it’s like for the rest of us,” he said, turning the steering lever slightly. “I don’t think about monsters, or talking animals, or...” He paused; something had occurred to him, Miles could tell. “I just don’t.”

“Wynston? What is it?” Miles asked, concerned.

“Caught that, did you?” Wynston said, his eyes moving away from Miles towards the approaching city. “It’s nothing. Wake up the Nytekap; we’re going to be arriving soon, and I want to find this Nytemare merchant as soon as possible.”

Miles picked up Wynx slowly and nodded.

Nytevale, like a lot of things in Nyte, as Miles had discovered, turned out to be a lot bigger once you were standing in it. The buildings were all sizes: some short, some tall, and some in the shapes of bubbles or bowls, like the Ranch. Most of them were made of dark blue bricks, the dominant color in Nyte. Windowsills and doorknobs were usually either a brassy yellow or a shiny silver, and other than that, the place wasn’t particularly colorful, just like the cities back home.

Right after they had gotten into Nytevale, Wynston insisted on pulling the cart instead of riding it; according to him, he had been feeling something “give,” and he didn’t want to be on top of it when they found out what it was. Miles didn’t mind one bit. This gave him an opportunity to study the different people he saw walking around.

Most of them were either Nytefolk, like Wynston, or Bodkin, who were mostly Buckle’s height and stature. Every now and then, Miles would see a gangly Bodkin like Spricket or a big one like Plunk, but they usually looked like they were in the service of a smaller one. Miles began to wonder if that was the

natural order of things in Bodkin society.

It didn't take long for Wynston to find the place; he'd spent some time in Nytevale before, apparently. The shop was called "Dibble's Dreams and 'Mares," one of the smaller houses that had been constructed of dark green bricks instead of blue, perhaps to stand out. The metal sign hung from a rod bolted above the door, and it sported a little Bodkin holding a Dream up, whose petals spun on a wheel whenever the wind blew. It made Miles think of Buckle's words concerning Gizmology, all about fun instead of function.

As soon as Wynston opened the front door, a wave of exotic scents washed over Miles, scents of candy and of smoke and a dozen other things he couldn't even place. Walking in revealed shelf after shelf of flowerpots, along the walls and dividing the aisles, each plant a bizarre little image. Some of them had leaves in the shapes of hearts, or daggers, or occasionally even hearts being *pierced* by daggers. Much to Miles' relief, no Nytemares were on display; a door in the back had a hastily scrawled sign that read "Mare Storage".

"Delivery," Wynston announced, as he dropped the backpack of Nytemare trimmings to the floor.

Sounds of scrambling and clanging echoed from behind the storage door, until it swung open and closed just as quickly. A Bodkin slightly taller than Buckle now stood before them, olive-skinned and dressed in a brown apron, smeared with stains of black. He had a cage-like mesh strapped to his face, much like a beekeeper, but he unbuckled it quickly and stowed it in his apron's front pocket.

"Wot's all this, then?" The shopkeeper asked, eyeing the backpack with caution. "I don't 'member no deliv'ry bein' ordered."

"Business from an associate of yours, named Buckle," Wynston said, handing the little Bodkin a crumpled up piece of paper. "He said you'd be

expecting this shipment.” The shopkeeper smacked himself in the forehead and chuckled.

“O’ course, o’ course! Good ol’ Bucky! ‘Ow’s the fellow oldin’ up, then?” He asked, shoving the paper in his apron and hoisting the backpack onto the nearby store counter.

“Wynston?” Miles asked, poking him in the knee. “If you’re going to be busy with this, I’d like to look around a bit, if you don’t mind. The Dreams here look fantastic.”

“Go ahead,” Wynston said. “Just don’t wander off too far. Remember what they say about cities: the taller the buildings, the longer the shadows.” Miles walked down the adjacent aisle of Dreams, holding Wynx up to inspect the merchandise.

“Hey, Wynx, which one of these is your favorite?” Miles asked, leaning Wynx into each one for a sniff. The little Nytekap never seemed very interested. “That’s funny, ever since the one with the mask, you just really couldn’t care less, could you?” Miles turned Wynx around, so they were facing each other. “What was it about that one? Thought it sort of looked like you?” Wynx just looked this way and that, completely uninterested. “You’re something of a mystery yourself, Wynx.”

“Don’t talk to him in public,” Wynston said, putting a hand on Miles’ shoulder from behind. “People will think you’re crazy.”

“Are you all done with the business?” Miles asked.

“Just about. Dibble over there’s going to count it all out, make sure everything’s where it’s supposed to be, and then we’re all done. Wasn’t too painful in the end after all. See anything you like?”

“They’re all pretty neat,” Miles said, “but there’s this one I saw a while back, with a little white mask, kind of like Wynx here. You know what I’m

talking about?” Wynston scratched his head, trying to stir up memories.

“Can’t say that I do, but I’m no Gardener. You might want to ask Dibble, he seems to know a thing or two. Now as for these Inspirations, here...” Wynston leaned forward to study a smaller Dream, with a flower like a brilliant red sunburst. “...this is really something of a high price. Must be out-of-season...”

Miles heard the front door open and close, and suddenly Wynx began making a sort of odd growling noise, squirming in Miles’ grip.

“Not feeling so well, I take it,” Miles said, walking out of the aisle to check the counter. “Maybe all you need is a...”

Miles couldn’t even see Dibble. His view was blocked by a looming figure, facing the other way. He had long hair colored gray, like dust. He was speaking in a hushed tone, and he wore a long, black coat.

His coat had a large, gleaming zipper running down the back.

“Wynston,” Miles said in a whisper, allowing Wynx to scurry up to his shoulder, “I think we’ve got trouble.”

“Sorry,” Wynston asked, turning the Inspiration’s flowerpot in a circle, “I missed what you said there.”

“His coat is on the wrong...”

Suddenly, Wynston’s eyes grew three sizes. He snatched Miles from outside the aisle and pressed him up against the shelf, out of sight from the counter. He put one hand on Miles’ mouth, and stayed perfectly still.

Behind Wynston on the opposite shelf was a display case, with a reflection that offered a hazy view of what was going on. Miles could make out the figure turning around; he had heard them. The figure had skin almost as pale as his hair, and his left eye shone a flickering glow, like a candle. Scarier still, the front of his coat bore a strange emblem, a large singular eye with a tear

dripping from its bottom.

He took one step forward and moved his hand to his right eye, where a large clock was strapped over where his eye should have been.

The man wound the clock once, then twice.

His hand returned to his side before he turned back around to face Dibble, who was saying something in a very nervous, jittery sort of voice.

Within moments, the figure left through the door without a sound.

Wynston waited another few seconds before releasing his grip. He moved quickly to the counter, where Dibble looked quite shaken.

“Are you all right?” Wynston asked. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

“No,” Dibble answered, in between deep breaths, “Didn’t touch a hair on me head. Just wanted information, was all.” He sat down behind the counter and closed his eyes, just focusing on his breaths.

“What did they want to know?” Miles asked, hoping they hadn’t made it onto some sort of Turncoat wanted list.

“Just where the Games were ‘eld, who supployes the Dreams and ‘Mares...y’know, that sort o’thing.”

“You mean the Great Gardeners’ Games, right?” Miles asked, wanting desperately to be part of the conversation.

“That’s right, lil’ feller,” Dibble affirmed as he slowly picked himself off of the ground and dusted off his apron. “Biggest attraction in this here city for quite a while. Can’t imagine why them ‘Coats would want a piece of it, though...” He shrugged, then scooped some black leaves off the counter into a bin. “Aw well, it’s all grumblerumble to me. It all checked out okay, Mr. Wynston, so yer free to go. I’d wanna watch the last part of the Games, if I was you. Preliminaries start this nyte, I think.” Miles looked at Wynston quizzically.

“Now that all the tests and trials are over,” Wynston said, “the

Gardeners compete against one another to see who's best. I guess the qualifying rounds happen around now, and the finals are in the next turn of the moon."

"I'd love to watch! And Wynx would too!" Miles shouted, thrusting Wynx up to agree.

"We'll at least check it out," Wynston said, "but if I see anything that resembles a Turncoat, we're out of there. Got it?" Miles and Wynx nodded together.

"Be careful," Dibble warned. "Them 'Coats don't take no prisoners."

The actual Games took place within a massive arena, shaped like a circle with rows and rows of seats surrounding it. The whole thing reminded Miles of a sports stadium from home, except the whole thing was put together with blue bricks and benches. A good number of the seats were already taken up, mostly by Bodkin, but with the occasional odd Nytefolk here and there.

Wynston explained that a Gardener was going to stand on one end, opposite another Gardener, and then the two would engage in some sort of intricate battle, where Dreams and Nytemares would be employed against each other for various offensive and defensive purposes.

"I can't imagine how they'll be attacking each other with plants, though," Miles said, as he took a seat only a couple of rows up from the front.

"Well, they won't be slapping each other with the Dreams, for Astra's sake," Wynston said, sitting down beside Miles. "They're *Gardeners*. If they're using Dreams, they'll be conjuring all sorts of Ephemera and Confabulations and whatnot. And if they're using Nytemares, you can bet things are going to get loud."

"But what does all that mean? Ephemera and..."

“Shoosh,” Wynston said, motioning towards the arena with his head. “Watching a game will explain it all much quicker than I could.”

A pair of metal gates swung open on one side of the arena, causing all of the Bodkin seated to simultaneously stand and cheer. A plump, bright green Bodkin waddled out into the dark grass, dressed in a tan vest and coat covered with singes and scorch marks. He reached into one of many coat pockets, pulled out a handful of something black, and tossed it into the air. With a snap of his fingers, the stuff exploded with a deafening *bang*.

Another pair of gates opened on the other side, prompting all of the Bodkin present to sit back down and sneer. Unsurprisingly, the person who walked out was quite unlike a Bodkin.

The woman was only slightly shorter than Wynston, but she certainly wasn't a Nytefolk. Her skin was pale, almost like the moon, and her ears ended in sharp points. Along with the eyes that softly glowed, Miles couldn't help but think of the clock-eyed Turncoat from the shop. Her snow-white hair was tied up in an elaborate braid, and her ice-blue gown kissed the ground every time she took another step, her baggy sleeves swaying in the wind. The Bodkins' taunts and jeers did little to diminish her graceful steps, and upon the gates' closing behind her, she merely gazed upon her opponent and smiled.

“Wow,” Miles said. “She's beautiful.” Miles didn't often find things “beautiful,” which he always considered a word girls used, but he couldn't help himself.

“Remind me not to take you to the Glens,” Wynston commented. “Every time a Laifkin would walk by, I'd have to put a bowl underneath your mouth just to catch the drool.”

“So that's a Laifkin,” Miles said. “You know, I think that Turncoat...”

“Yes, he was definitely a Laifkin. The Turncoats don't discriminate; they

recruit whoever they can get.”

A short-haired Nytefolk in a long, purple coat took his time walking between the two Gardeners, and then unrolled a scroll from which he read:

“The Gardeners here today have already proved themselves worthy in examinations of knowledge and skill. But it is here, in the Duel of Dreams, where their true mettle shall be put to the test. The Duel shall progress until one of the combatants either admits defeat, is unable to go on Gardening for any reason, or is deemed the victor by the judges. Do the combatants understand these rules?”

The Bodkin nodded vigorously; the Laifkin nodded once.

“In that case...*begin!*” The Nytefolk in the purple coat vanished, his image dissolving into a cloud of shining sparkles that flit to the ground.

Reaching into her sleeves, the Laifkin produced a pair of slender Dreams, long, leafy stalks that both ended in a butterfly-like flower. After getting her weapons in hand, she just stood there, waiting for her opponent’s first move.

Grinning with glee, the Bodkin Gardener flung another handful of black, mossy Nytemares into the center of the arena. From its landing sprung a number of ropy vines, not unlike those belonging to Nytethorn, slithering along the ground towards the Laifkin. She twirled her Dreams between her fingers as she chanted something under her breath.

From either Dream erupted a flock of strange creatures, birds whose wings had been stretched out like that of a butterfly, with coiled antenna atop their heads. Or did they look more like giant butterflies covered in feathers? Miles couldn’t make up his mind. Both swarms appeared tiny at first, but rapidly enlarged in size as they darted around the black tendrils, shrieking a shrill cry that caused the vines to writhe and twist in place.

Their progress firmly halted, the Laifkin took a step forward. Unfortunately, her adversary wasn't quite out of tricks.

The wily Bodkin spat angrily onto the ground, his first assault handily thwarted. This time, he clenched the fistfuls of Nytemare powder tightly between his fingers. The few hairs on his otherwise bald head began to stand on end.

Upon releasing his left hand, a black bolt of Nytemare streaked towards the Laifkin like lightning. It collided with the palm of her hand, which held a large, sun-shaped flower. The Dream blackened and withered, having absorbed the full force of the Nytemare attack.

Then the Bodkin opened his right hand. A second smoking projectile shot towards the Laifkin, who deflected it with a backhand slap; out of nowhere, another sun-shaped flower had sprouted from the back of her hand. The blast landed almost directly at the Bodkin's feet, who was launched into the air and landed unceremoniously on the ground.

Before he could scramble back to his feet, the Laifkin had already brandished a tiny, ivory-colored, star-shaped Dream, which she dropped quickly by her foot. Kicking the Dream resulted in a shower of blue sparks, so bright that Miles had to partially avert his eyes. The Bodkin covered his face with both of his hands and cowered.

While he rubbed his eyes to regain his vision, two of the birdlike creatures from before swooped down and collided with each other. The two melted into each other, creating a singular creature that was now twice the size of either of the original beasts. All of them followed suit, until by the end of it all, only one massive creature remained, standing about as tall as an elephant, with its cold, feral eyes fixed on the Bodkin. The Laifkin stood directly underneath it, patting it affectionately on the leg.

When the Bodkin stopped rubbing his eyes, he came face to face with the enormous animal. He then rubbed them again, as though he were seeing things, which triggered a series of laughs from the audience. As he opened his eyes a second time, they grew wider and wider.

A whistle blew, from somewhere off in the distance.

“And the winner...*Norrica!*”

As the audience filed out of the arena, Miles watched the Laifkin, apparently named Norrica, pet her gigantic guardian as it slowly became transparent, and then disappeared completely.

“Can...can I go talk to her?” Miles asked Wynston, timidly.

“Don’t see why not,” Wynston said. “Just don’t get offended if she sticks her nose up; Laifkin aren’t renowned for their compassion towards things un-Laifkinlike.”

Miles climbed down a staircase to the front, Wynx on his shoulder, and knocked on the imposing gate that kept passers-by from just walking through the arena.

“Excuse me! Excuse me, Miss Norrica!” Miles yelled, hoping to catch her attention. Norrica turned in his direction, and smiled warmly.

“Are you trying to get in?” She asked, as she pulled a thread on either side of her gown; her sleeves tightened onto her arms snugly. “Here, I’m on my way out, so please hold on just a moment.” Her voice had this slightly musical quality, as though all of her words were lyrics to a song playing in the back of her head.

Norrica walked up to the gate and twisted some sort of mechanism Miles couldn’t quite make out from his side. With a click and a clack, the gate slid open, and Norrica walked out, holding it open with a single hand. “Did you

leave something inside? I hate when that happens.”

“No, not at all,” Miles said, a little shy. “I just wanted a chance to speak with you, if it’s all right. You were *amazing* out there!”

“Oh, no I wasn’t,” Norrica said, the music in her voice disappearing. “I made all sorts of silly mistakes, and the Hoaps were getting hard to control at the end. Honestly, I’m really surprised I managed to win that at all.”

“What match were *you* watching?” Wynston asked, having walked in behind Miles. “That poor Bodkin had no idea what hit him, in the end. I don’t think he scored a single point.”

Norrica seemed to be distracted by a thought for a moment, then just shook her head and smiled again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get either of your names. I should very much like to know what to call my only fans in all of Nytevale. Seems like the Bodkin really took over the place.”

“Miles,” Miles said, bowing slightly as though she were royalty. “And this here is Wynx.” Wynx hopped to the ground, stood upright, and then also bowed. “And my friend here is...”

“So, what brings a Laifkin all the way out to the Games?” Wynston asked, interrupting Miles sharply. “I didn’t think they sent Gardeners anymore since Queen Eshalla passed away.” Miles glared at Wynston, as did Wynx.

“Quite knowledgeable about the Glens, aren’t you?” Norrica asked, tilting her head to the side. “I haven’t seen you somewhere before, have I?”

“Unlikely,” Wynston replied, in a tone of voice that Miles had come to recognize as a not-always-trustworthy tone. “All us Nytefolk look alike.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Norrica said. “You’re an incredible people, with some of the greatest Gardeners known to history. You shouldn’t sell yourself short.” Wynston looked completely taken by surprise.

“I’m always telling him the same thing,” Miles said. “Unfortunately, that’s

just sort of the way he is.”

“Shame to hear it,” she said, a pout on her face. “Now if it’s all right with you two, I’d like to be getting back to where I’m staying in Nytevale. Got the finals tomorrow and everything.”

“Of course,” Wynston said.

“Hey, where are *we* staying, Wynston?” Miles asked. “I’m actually getting pretty tired myself.”

“Wynston...” Norrica repeated the name, with greater importance.

“Wynston...Wyn...Wynsutah?” She looked Wynston up and down.

“Wynsutah! By Astra...it’s really you!”

“*Here we go,*” Wynston said.

“But, after the River...you just...and then...oh, this is such an occasion! The two of you simply *must* accompany me back to the inn! Wynsutah himself...”

As they started walking, Miles couldn’t help but smile. “Who *are* you, Wynston?” He asked.

“No one worth talking about,” Wynston replied.

Norrica’s accommodations weren’t much; two rooms, with a simple bed and drawers in one and a couch and table in the other. Miles didn’t really mind it, though; he was just happy to find a place where he could finally get some rest. With all the adventuring he’d been up to, he hadn’t realized just how tired he actually was. But before he went to bed, he wanted to learn a few things.

“So...*Wynsutah.*” Miles said, the name heavy on his tongue.

“Your friend here was once a hero of our people,” Norrica said, sitting on the couch beside Miles. “He was actually raised among us, having washed up on the shores of the River of Regret as an infant, floating in a little Dream

basket.”

“Oh, just tell him *everything*, why don’t you,” Wynston snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Norrica said. “Perhaps you should tell the story instead, so I don’t say anything I shouldn’t.”

“Not much to tell, really. I lived among the Laifkin of the Glens as a kid, grew up with them, learned their ways and their arts, and then I took a dip in the River of Regret. Nasty place, where all your regrets weigh you down until you drown. Got pulled out, and…”

“…And now he acts like this, always down all the time.” Norrica interjected. “Don’t you go and make it sound like you *fell* in. You were saving a Laifkin child!”

“Something to that effect,” Wynston said, clearly uninterested. “Then the Laifkin in charge didn’t like how I was acting, and they *certainly* didn’t approve of the Gizmology.” Wynston rapped his forearm against the table, triggering the blade to spring out. “Used this as a way to equip my blade after the River incident; became too apathetic to even pull the thing out of a sheath. So rather than wait for the good folk there to exile me, I just left.”

“And here you are!” Norrica exclaimed. “Still running around the world doing good, I imagine.”

“Not really,” Wynston said.

“He is,” Miles said, “even if he doesn’t admit it. He’s escorting me all the way to the Bodkin King, after all.”

“The Bodkin King?” Norrica repeated. “What is it you want from him? I hear he locks himself in Mulgenbod Keep all nyte, every nyte.”

“It’s a long, silly story,” Wynston said, popping the blade back into its covering. “But that’s where we’re headed. How about you?”

“Off to see the Archgardener, in the Valley. I hear he’s got a Garden

fenced in by gold and silver!” Norrica almost spun in her seat. “Anyway, all Laifkin Gardeners are supposed to visit the most important Gardeners in the world before they’re officially appointed to the Council. It’s tradition.”

“Laifkin are nothing without their traditions,” Wynston said to Miles. Norrica frowned.

“Maybe so, but they make us who we are. And you know, the fastest way to the Archgardener is right past Mulgenbod. You two...” Wynx squeaked. “...three, I mean, could escort me as well! Oh, this will be *so* much more tolerable with some good company. Especially with someone like the legendary Wynsutah...” Wynston closed his eyes momentarily, although Miles could guess he was rolling them underneath his eyelids.

“I don’t know about this,” Wynston said. “No offense, Norrica, but Miles here is priority one. We’re going to figure out to get him back to...” Miles and Wynston exchanged glances. “...*wherever*, and that comes first.” Norrica stared at Miles sadly.

“Oh, are you a long ways from your home? I’m so sorry! That must be terrible, especially for one so young. Of course, your safety comes first.”

“That’s okay, I’m having a good time. Other than Nytemares and Turncoats, this wouldn’t be a bad place to live.”

“Speaking of which, we’ve spotted some Turncoats sniffing around the Gardeners’ Games,” Wynston warned, “so you should be careful, Norrica. I think they’re plotting something.”

“But aren’t they *always*?” Norrica asked as she rose from the couch. “That might be enough excitement for me for one nyte. You two are welcome to stay up as late as you want, and you can sleep on the couch, if you’d like.”

“Before you go to bed,” Miles said, “I just want you to know you’re an incredible Gardener. With the lights, and the stars, and those bird things...”

“You mean the Hoaps?” Norrica asked. She plucked a Dream from the vase on the table and flicked it twice with her forefinger. A miniature Hoap popped out from its petals and lazily circled in the air.

“How are you doing that?” Miles asked.

“It’s called Ephemera,” Norrica explained, putting the Dream back in the vase as the Hoap landed on top of Wynx. “They’re insubstantial images you create from the essence of a Dream. They’re my specialty, actually, although you’d never have seen Ephemera until you saw my sister perform. Now *she* was a Gardener.” The tiny, illusory Hoap disappeared like a bubble. “Good nyte, Miles, and good nyte, Wynsutah. I have a wonderful feeling about this.” With that, Norrica walked into her room and closed the door behind her.

“She keeps putting herself down like that,” Miles said in a low voice, in case she might hear him. “Reminds me of you, actually.”

“Ha *ha*,” Wynston laughed sarcastically.

“It’s strange,” Miles started, as he put Wynx on the table, “to think that you were a completely different person once. I can’t imagine you any other way besides the way you are right now. I’m not sure I want to.” Wynston stayed quiet. “All the same, I like you the way you are, and I don’t think you need to change one bit.”

“Thanks, Miles,” Wynston said as he lay down on the floor. “It’s nice to know I’ve got somebody sticking up for me.” Miles lay down on the couch, facing Wynx.

“Sweet dreams, Wynston,” Miles said.

“What?” Wynston asked, straining to sit up.

“Sorry, it’s something else that’s different about where I’m from. Dreams don’t grow out of the ground, they’re something in your head, something no one can explain or study but they’re there anyway. You don’t have dreams like

that here, do you?”

“If we did, I’d think I would have heard of them,” Wynston replied.
“You promise me you’re not making all of this up?”

“I promise,” Miles said.

The next day, the arena was even more packed than before, mostly with even more obnoxious Bodkin. Miles had found the same seats from before, and had made sure to tell Norrica where they’d be sitting so she could wave or send a Hoap their way. Miles still found the whole idea of Gardening fascinating, and couldn’t wait to learn more about it from her on their travels.

The beginning transpired very much the same way, with the gates being opened and the authoritative Nytefolk in the purple coat. This time, however, Norrica’s opponent was a short, copper-colored Bodkin wearing a pair of oversized flight goggles and a small, personalized blimp strapped to his back. The thing ran on a supply of thick, noxious Nytemare gas, and hooked up to the dirigible were a pair of rubber hoses that spiraled around the Gardener’s arms and ended in nozzles by his wrists. As the Bodkin entered the combat area, he kept himself suspended just above the ground with a steady, hissing stream of the gas.

“Is there something familiar about that?” Miles asked, loudly to be heard over the cheering.

“Familiar about what?” Wynston responded.

“The smoke...there’s something about the smoke...” Miles was having trouble being heard. “Never mind.”

Norrica walked out, steady in her step, and winked in their direction. A couple of the nearby Bodkin regarded Miles and Wynston with a certain disdain. Clearly, relations between Bodkin and Laifkin were less than favorable.

The Nytefolk went through the rules once more, this time with an additional clause to explain that these were the finals. Also, this time, it seemed as though there was a prize at stake.

“...and aside from the praise and adoration of the entire Gardener community...” The Nytefolk produced a Dream from inside his coat, a curious little thing with a leaf over the flower in the shape of a white mask. “...the winner shall receive one of the rarest Dreams in all of Nyte!”

“I’ve seen that one!” Miles shouted. Wynx’s mask rotated slightly; there was something about that Dream that intrigued him. “Remember that one, Wynx? It’s your favorite!”

“Begin!”

The judge disappeared once more, but this time, the masked Dream stayed behind, and fell softly to the ground between the two Gardeners. Norrica clapped her hands as an enormous Hoap materialized and spread itself out over the strange flower. The goggled Bodkin just snickered as he pulled on the hoses, causing his flying machine to jettison him into the air. Spiraling upwards as he ascended, the nozzles on his wrists began to spew the black smoke, until he was completely concealed in a cyclone of the stuff.

Norrica held out a pair of star-shaped Dreams, her first line of defense against Nytemare attacks. The black, wispy tornado began to draw closer, until the Hoap looked as if it were exerting a colossal effort to stay on the ground.

“Keep it up, Norrica!” Miles yelled. Wynston just sat there.

Suddenly, the Hoap flew into the air, sucked into the storm of Nytemares. Norrica clapped her hands once more, and in a startling reverse, the huge Hoap split into a flock of smaller ones, all of them now fluttering about the whirlwind. The smoke dissipated, revealing the Gardener now trapped inside a flock of swirling Hoaps. Gritting his teeth, he expelled a

considerable amount of the smog, which quickly took the form of an enormous flyswatter. It immediately began smacking Hoaps out of the sky.

And that was when Miles remembered.

“The ranch!” Miles jumped out of his seat and shook Wynston by the shoulders. “He’s from back at the ranch!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“In the sky, something told those Shades to come after us. It was a whole lot of black smoke, that looked like an arrow, which came out of something flying around a lot.” Miles pointed right at the Gardener. Wynston’s eyes narrowed.

“Come on, we’re going downstairs. We’ll tell whoever we need to tell.”

Wynston ran up to the gates, which were locked from the inside, as usual. He banged his fists against the bars, hoping to make noise someone important would hear.

“It’s no use,” Miles said, Wynx in his hands. “We’re just going to have to find whoever’s in charge.”

“Looks like you could use some help,” A voice said from behind them. Wynston turned around to regard the speaker.

“As a matter of fact, we...” Wynston froze.

Miles turned around to come face-to-face with the clock-eyed Laifkin from the shop, still in his full Turncoat attire.

“Unless the situation is of the direst nature, we would prefer the Games be uninterrupted. The Gardeners need their concentration.”

“So the Turncoats ordered the attack on the ranch...” Wynston whispered. “What do you want with us?” He asked, louder.

Wynx relentlessly squirmed in Miles’ hands.

“None of your concern,” the Laifkin replied, coldly.

“All right then. Let us go, and no one needs to get hurt.” Wynston said, without so much as a tremble in his voice.

Wynx reached his pom-pom out for the bars. Miles had an idea.

“Threats? Cute,” the Laifkin smirked. He reached behind him, inside of his turncoat, for something. “There’s a chance you may not understand the kind of danger you’re in.”

“I’d say there’s definitely a chance,” Wynston said, his blade ejecting from its casing. “But it certainly looks like someone’s going to get hurt.”

Within a fraction of a second, the Laifkin had a pistol pointed at Wynston’s head, with a ticking clock face installed in the side of the gun.

“Yes, it certainly does,” the Laifkin retorted. Wynston became completely still.

Behind Miles’ back, Wynx popped in between the bars and twisted the mechanism furiously with his pom-pom.

The gate swung wide open; Miles, still holding onto the bars, was tossed unceremoniously into the arena. A collective gasp sounded from among the entire crowd.

The Bodkin scowled as he laid his goggled eyes on Miles; he clearly saw something he didn’t like. The Gardener swooped down and caught the masked Dream in his teeth.

At once, a flock of Hoaps descended on him, clouding his vision and causing him to fly erratically in shaky circles. It seemed as though he would never escape.

A gunshot was fired from outside.

A popping noise sounded, followed by the sound of hissing as the Bodkin’s dirigible tore a hole and caused the Gardener to rocket up into the

nyte sky and far off into the roofs of Nytevale.

Wynston dashed in, and scooped Miles off of the ground, who was still a little dizzy from his fall. Norrica ran over to the two of them.

“What was that noise?” She asked, as she gave Miles a purple leaf to chew on. He suddenly felt quite oriented, once more.

“*That* was a Turncoat,” Wynston explained. “He shot the Gardener’s little machine to get him out of there. They got what they wanted...whatever that Dream meant to them, it’s theirs now.”

Miles hopped back onto the ground, to face a gigantic audience, all with their gazes fixed on him.

He took a dramatic bow, which Wynx mimicked perfectly.

Wynston and Norrica looked at each other, then Miles, then also bowed.

The crowd roared.

Chapter Seven

In The Court Of The Bodkin King

“There sure are a whole lot of bad people after us,” Miles commented, as the three of them left the city gates. “Turncoats, Shades...and I haven’t even met this Darkshade person.”

“Hope that you never get to,” Wynston said. “He’s a Shade all dressed in armor, who dipped his mask in molten metal. It dried up, and now he’s got an indestructible mask and a very mean temper.”

“So you’ve met him before?” Norrica asked, innocently. She could now move more comfortably, dressed in a long, bright blue coat instead of her

Gardener's gown.

"Well, no, but I've heard stories."

"So you don't really know then, do you?" Norrica said, a little pointedly. "For all you know he's not that bad at all. Maybe he's just misunderstood, and scared."

"*Whatever* he is, I can tell you that he's not all Hoaps and moonbeams," Wynston remarked, dryly. "Besides, with a Great Gardener along with us, what do we have to worry?"

"Oh, I only won on a technicality," Norrica replied, running her fingers over the crystalline, flower-shaped pendant that now hung from her neck. "I mean, it's not any less of an honor. I just wouldn't go around calling myself that."

"But those Hoaps had that Turncoat anyway!" Miles said. Wynx tweeted in agreement. "You would have won that fair and square. You've got nothing to be ashamed of."

"Thank you, Miles," Norrica said, with a quick smile. "That's very sweet of you."

"So Mulgenbod, eh?" Wynston said to himself, surveying their immediate surroundings. "If we start walking now, we could hit the Keep by...three? Maybe four nytes, if we end up stopping somewhere for too long."

"Surely you don't think we're walking?" Norrica asked, walking over to a pinkish Dream bush off the side of the road. "I'm a Gardener, for Astra's sake! I don't think I could make it a day on foot if I had to. Why do you think I led us out by the western exit?" Norrica proceeded to wheel a gleaming wooden cart out from behind the bush, quite similar to the one they had used to get there, except this was one less rickety and looked like it could actually survive more than a few miles.

“A Nytemare-powered cart...” Wynston said, with a gasp. “You’re breaking some pretty serious rules there, you know.”

“What’s wrong with Nytemare carts? I think I’m beginning to like them,” Miles said, as he put Wynx on the cart before jumping up on top himself, next to Norrica.

“It counts as Gizmology, which is *strictly* forbidden amongst the Laifkin. And when the Laifkin forbid things, they forbid it with a vengeance.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Norrica said, extending a hand to help Wynston onto the cart. “I believe in many of the Laws that our ancestors created, because a lot of them are there for a reason. But some of them just don’t make sense. Take the forbidding of Nytemares, for instance. Nytemares! How can anyone call themselves a Gardener if they can’t study both sides of the art? It’s silly, is what it is.”

“But you don’t have any Nytemares...do you?” Miles asked.

“The cart’s got to run on *something*. And I’ve got this bag of Nytemare seeds I’ve been collecting for my own research,” Norrica said as she took a small cloth satchel from her coat pocket and shook it. It made a sound like clicking beads. “You know, the current Archgardener was the only person to ever win the Great Gardeners’ Games registered as both a wielder of Dreams *and* Nytemares. That’s unheard of.”

“You keep bringing up this Archgardener guy,” Miles said. “He must be something special.”

“Miles has a point,” Wynston said. “Should see if you can marry him when we visit.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing to happen,” Norrica said.

It didn’t take long before the Dream trees and grasses disappeared, and

the land began to resemble the unforgiving, rocky lands of the Facility once more. This time, Miles noticed that the rocks looked even pointier, that the ridges looked even sharper. It was almost as if the land itself tried to look as unappealing as possible. Little huts that probably belonged to the Bodkin began to appear, but they were oddly quiet, with not a resident in sight.

“Wynston? What do you think happened?” Miles asked.

“The whole area around Mulgenbod went to pieces after the Bodkin King locked himself away. It tore up all the Bodkin, to see their ruler like this. They loved him more than I think the Bodkin have ever loved anything.”

“The Bodkin King, the Nytefolk Lord, and the Laifkin Queen fought alongside each other in a war a very long time ago,” Norrica said. “They battled against the wicked Aganee, a Gardener capable of such evil he almost took over all of Nyte. In the end, *most* who fought managed to survive.”

“Queen Eshalla of the Laifkin wasn’t so lucky,” Wynston interrupted.

“I’m sorry, Norrica,” Miles said, softly. The pom-pom thread on Wynx drooped sadly.

“Oh, it’s all right. It was when I was young, so I don’t remember much of it. But the Bodkin King...he blamed himself for what happened, and never quite recovered. Not to mention his retainer, a miserable little Gardener called Iddrick, created the one known as Darkshade in the King’s absence.”

“I’ll make the long story short from here,” Wynston said. “So the Bodkin King gets back, feels terrible about what happened, and finds out one of his own people loosed Darkshade on the world, not to mention that the Bodkin and the Laifkin are now constantly at each other’s throats. On the day when Eshalla’s head Gardener is about to lead the Laifkin in battle, the Bodkin King meets him out on the field and tells him that any and all anger that they would direct towards his people, they should direct at *him* instead. So the

Gardener puts a terrible curse on the King, a curse that robs him of his powers and shrinks him to a height even shorter than you.” Wynston paused to point at Miles. “He came back to Mulgenbod Keep, locked himself away, and hasn’t really been heard from since.”

“That sounds terrible,” Miles said. “All that misery, and it was never really his fault. He just didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Well, that’s what happens to the nice ones,” Wynston said. “There’s a lesson to be learned there.” Norrica took her hand off the steering wheel to swiftly smack Wynston in the back of the head. “Ow! What was *that* for?”

“Stop saying things like that! You’re so *grumpy* all the time, you’d think it’d hurt you to say something nice.”

“Now that’s just not true,” Wynston said. “Here, watch this.” He turned to Miles and stared at him intently. “Now Miles...” He paused.

“Wow,” Miles said. “Norrica’s got you all figured out.”

“Miles...” Wynston tried again. “Have I ever told you that you’ve got marvelous...*get down*,” Wynston said, almost in a whisper.

“What? I didn’t quite catch that last bit,” Miles said.

Wynston grabbed Miles by his shoulders and pulled him down below the railing of the cart, so someone looking from outside wouldn’t even know he was there.

“What’s going on?” Norrica asked.

“Just keep going,” Wynston said, urgently. Miles could make out through the railing a black, slithering form squeezing itself through an abandoned hut’s window.

“Shades,” Miles whispered, under his breath. Wynn scurried underneath Miles’ shirt and trembled, so Miles made sure to hold him extra tight.

“The Keep’s over the next ridge. How are we going to smuggle you out

of this thing?” Wynston asked.

“Relax,” Norrica said, as she reached inside one of her gown’s pockets and took out one of the sun-shaped Dreams that Miles recalled from the Gardener’s Games. “It’s a Solarix. Potent anti-Nytemare, which means potent anti-Shade.” She cracked the Dream at its stem, and circled it around her head as a golden powder, flickering with little motes of light, wafted into the air around them. Instantly, Miles could see the black shapes through the railings disappear.

“That’s incredible,” Miles said, sitting up once more. Wynx scrambled out from underneath his shirt, and swung his pom-pom in the shimmering haze. “How is it you know all this?”

“I’m a Gardener, Miles,” Norrica said, with a laugh. “I wouldn’t be very good at my job if I didn’t. If you think I’m good, my sister would have...”

“Yes yes, your sister was much better than you, we get it,” Wynston said. Norrica shot him a murderous look that Miles didn’t think Norrica was capable of showing, until then. Wynston stared right back. “I didn’t mean any offense. I just think we all know that you’re a very capable Gardener, and it wouldn’t kill you to admit it every once in a while.”

“Tell you what, I’ll start admitting it when you start saying nice things. How’s that for a deal?” Norrica asked.

“I’ll take it into consideration,” Wynston replied.

“I guess this is the Keep,” Miles said, as Wynx hopped back to his shoulder, ready to adventure once more.

Before them loomed an enormous castle, constructed of the dark blue bricks that composed most structures in Nyte. Towers marked the leftmost and rightmost corners of the front castle wall, which wasn’t much of a wall anymore. Gaping holes were punched right through the brickwork, and the

front gate was barely hanging on by a single hinge.

Wynston strode right up to the gate and knocked once; the entire door fell backwards, with an echoing clang.

“Not much of a ‘Keep’ anymore, is it? Can’t imagine what this place could keep, other than a draft.” Wynston said.

The three of them walked into the courtyard, a spooky sight. Wooden boards and broken stones littered the place, and dead grass combined with brittle dirt made for a crunchy, natural carpet to walk upon. A statue of a mighty eight-foot-tall Bodkin presided over the courtyard from the center. Its hair was tied into ropy braids, which combined with the champion’s intricately knotted beard to form a sort of mane around the face. Its eyes were intense, its features were strong, and it held a massive pole in its equally massive fists.

“And that would be the Bodkin King,” Miles guessed.

“The one and only,” Wynston confirmed. “Of course, he doesn’t look quite so majestic after the curse, or at least that’s what I hear.”

Wynx dropped into Miles’ arms and began to shake.

“Don’t suppose you’d have another one of those ‘Solarix’ Dreams, would you, Norrica?” Miles asked.

“Only a couple more, actually,” Norrica replied.

“I hope you weren’t saving them for a special occasion, because I think our friends are back,” Miles said. Wynston flicked his wrist, and his trademark blade appeared with a click.

Norrica split another Solarix, and repeated her little ritual. This time, Shades melted out of every corner of the courtyard and slithered past them, into the castle itself.

“This place is just one big hive for the Shades, isn’t it? I thought the Bodkin King still lived here somewhere,” Miles said.

“That’s actually an excellent point,” Norrica agreed. “Why would he just put up with the things? Surely he can’t care so little that he just decides to let them live here.”

“Sounds like a lot like Wynston before I met him,” Miles said. “Maybe you two will get along just fine.”

“All right, that’s enough abuse for one day,” Wynston replied. “What I’m worried about is not that he’s just letting them live here, but if we’ve just stumbled upon the beginning of an invasion?”

“Then I think we should probably hurry,” Miles said.

The three of them rushed through the inner chambers of the castle with little difficulty, since every door and barricade was about as secure in its frame as the front gates. Most rooms were empty, or only had the barest of beds and drawers. Every once in a while, they would encounter a lone Shade, who would melt into a black puddle and flow away, repelled by the lingering effects of Norrica’s powerful Solarix.

After checking a number of such rooms, they entered what looked to be some kind of main hall when they heard voices, coming from beyond the cracked double-doors at the center of the hall. Wynston pushed his blade from its casing slowly, so as not to create a noise. Norrica reached into her pocket, for a Dream that Miles recognized as an Inspiration. Miles, certainly not wanting to be left out, held Wynx forward, almost like a weapon. In response, Wynx spun his pom-pom thread in slow, menacing circles.

Wynston pushed one of the doors open ever so slightly, got low to the ground, and slid inside, completely silent. Norrica crawled on her hands and knees, not quite as elegantly, while Miles crouched down and followed.

Inside, the three of them quickly hid behind half of a smashed bench,

while Miles got a quick look around. This looked to be some sort of throne room, with various plaques and honors dotting the walls. A pair of banners flowed down the wall on the far side of the room, each one marked with numerous, crazed, smiling faces, each with the maniacal grin of pointed teeth that Miles had come to symbolically associate with the Bodkin. In between the banners was a largish crown, where a throne looked like it belonged. Had the King's crown *become* his throne? Miles wondered.

Standing in front of the crown, talking to each other, were two very unusual people.

The one on the left was a green-skinned Bodkin even shorter than Buckle, with a long nose, pointed ears that didn't even point in the same direction, and a mostly bald head with only a few, wiry hairs sticking out from the top. He wore a brown, hooded leather shirt with the hood pulled down, as well as a cape billowing out from the back. His hands were in his pockets, his eyes twinkled like little gemstones, and a tiny metal rod, like a toothpick, dangled from his mouth when he spoke.

This, Miles surmised, was the Bodkin King. He certainly didn't bear much resemblance to his former self, if that was indeed what the statue depicted, but Miles liked the way he looked all the same. His companion was a less strange, but somehow more frightening picture.

A man stood there, wearing a black coat and rounded black hat like Miles always saw in photos of America from 70 years ago in his history textbook. The buttons on his coat cast a cold silver gleam, as did the top of the walking stick which the man leaned on, which was otherwise black to the bottom. There were accented touches of white; his white gloves, his white shirt collar, but most noteworthy of all was his white mask. This mask had all of the features in the right places, unlike Nytethorn's, but what was so scary about it

was that the expression on the mask was completely emotionless. It was as though someone had sucked all the joy, all the anger, all the sadness out of someone's face, and had used that face to mold a mask, and then put that mask on this very strange man. Miles didn't like him in an instant.

The Bodkin looked over at their bench and snorted.

"You can come out, we know you're there," he said, in a deep voice that didn't match up at all with his outward appearance. "Don't do anything rash."

Wynston was the first to stand up. Miles assumed he'd retract his blade, but Wynston did no such thing as he slowly walked up to the pair and nodded once in greeting. Norrica quickly followed, and Miles decided to follow her before he got left behind. The moment he stood up from behind the bench, the masked man in the hat and coat fixed his gaze upon him and didn't look away.

"*Very* interesting," the man said, in a voice that had the quality of flowing oil. Miles almost got goosebumps on his arms just from the sound. The man looked at Wynx momentarily; Wynx looked right back and rotated his mask slightly, in his curious fashion. The man made a noise like a singular chuckle, and then went back to staring at Miles again.

"O wise and wondrous King of the Bodkin, forgive us for trespassing on your property," Norrica said, kneeling before him. The Bodkin King exhaled a long, icy sigh and shook his head. "Get off the ground, stop it with that grumblerub. Now, was there something I could do for you? I'm a bit busy at the moment."

"Didn't mean to interrupt," Wynston said. "You can two can finish your business first, if you'd like. We could be a while."

"So be it," the Bodkin King said, wearily. Miles, Norrica, and Wynston all walked back to the other end of the room, while the Bodkin King began

discussing other matters with the man in the hat and coat once more.

“Look up,” Wynston said. On the ceiling were a number of Shades, all of their wooden masks facing downwards. “I’d bet they’d pounce on us in a second if it wasn’t for the Solarix, right, Norrica?” Norrica looked concerned.

“Actually, that must be wearing thin about now. There must be something else keeping them at bay. Perhaps that peculiar character with the King? I’ve never seen a Nytefolk wear clothes quite like those.”

“I don’t think he’s a Nytefolk,” Miles said. “And I don’t think he’s a Laifkin either.”

“You’re not going to tell me he’s a *Bodkin*,” Wynston said.

The more Miles thought about it, the more he realized that the man in the hat and coat reminded him quite a bit of Nytethorn. There was the mask, the black and white colors, and the strange, inexplicable quality of the air surrounding them. Yes, there was no mistaking it; the two of them had quite a bit in common.

Now what had Nytethorn called himself, a while ago?

“Greatest asset to justice...injurious rascal...” Miles started.

“What?” Wynston asked, completely confused.

“A rogue...a wanderer...what was that word...”

“What word?” Norrica asked, wanting to help.

“He’s...he’s a Laysid...no, a Loesid...*Loosid!*” Miles almost shouted it as it came to him, he was so excited.

As soon as he spoke that word, the room went quiet.

He turned around to see that the man in the hat and coat was staring at him again, and the Bodkin King was now alternating glances between Miles and the masked man, as if the man’s eerie gaze was alarming to him as well.

The man tipped his hat downwards in Miles’ direction, and suddenly the

man's outline became blurry and indistinct, as though Miles was seeing him through a frosted window. The man's image stretched towards Miles, like it was being refracted through a funhouse mirror, and then snapped back to normal, with the man now standing in front of Miles. The whole process occurred in less than a second, alerting Miles that this man was capable of crossing tremendous distances with little trouble.

He let go of his hat and knelt down on one knee in front of Miles, putting one gloved hand on Miles' shoulder.

"Tell me, child," the man began, his voice smooth as ever, "where did you learn that word?"

"I...I don't remember," Miles managed to say, with some effort.

"Think on it a moment," the man said. Just like Nytethorn, there were no eyes behind the mask; only pools of darkness.

"I really don't," Miles said again. "Must have just overheard it somewhere, you know? Probably from a Gardener."

"But Gardeners speak only of Dreams and Nytemares. Or should I say...nightmares?" For the first time, Miles could detect the difference instantaneously.

"Hey! You can..."

"That's right," the man said. "Now, I need you to do me an enormous favor and tell me where you heard that word. Can you do that for me?"

"Look, if he can't remember, he can't remember," Wynston interjected. "What's the big deal, anyway?" Wynston took a step closer. "How about we just..."

The man raised his hand and snapped his fingers. A pair of Shades dropped from the ceiling, and stared at Wynston with their dark, hollow eyes.

"I'm sorry," the man said, strangely at odds with his violent action, "I

never got your name. What do you call yourself, child?"

"Miles."

"Miles," the man repeated. "That's a wonderful name." He opened his gloved hand, and then closed it into a fist, quickly. The two Shades flowed underneath Wynston's feet, and then restrained him by elongating their arms into inky ropes.

"Leave my friend alone!" Miles cried out.

"Just please, Miles, try to remember for me," the man said, again, "just who was it that told you that word?"

"Take a lucky guess," a familiar voice spoke, from above.

Miles gazed up to see Nytethorn, standing on the ceiling next to a Shade, who looked rather unsure as what to make of the situation. It melted into a puddle and quickly slid away.

Nytethorn opened his black cape, and dozens of black vines, covered in jagged barbs, sprang from within and covered the man in the hat and coat completely.

"Get back, Miles!" Nytethorn shouted in a voice that was quite unlike him. Miles quickly did as he was told. The comical, whimsical tone in Nytethorn's voice that always made it sound as though he were in control of the situation was notably absent. For the first time Miles had seen, Nytethorn was scared.

The noise of metal whistling through the air sounded multiple times, as the vines surrounding the masked man were cleanly chopped away. The man crouched there, his weapon extended; a black blade, thin as a needle with a sharp point. He held his walking stick in his other hand by his waist, like a sheath.

The walking stick began to blur the same way the man had before, but

the man flicked his weapon back into the cane in the blink of an eye, and the stick quickly returned to normal.

The Shades holding onto Wynston released him almost instantly, and kept bumping into each other in an attempt to grab a hold of Nytethorn. Wynston dove at the man in the hat and coat with a fierce lunging kick to the chest.

Wynston's leg passed right through him, shimmering the man's image slightly, as though he were made of water. Without removing his gaze from Nytethorn, the man swatted at Wynston with his cane; the blow sent Wynston sailing through the air. He rolled along the ground right back onto his feet, and stared at his foe with a newfound respect.

"You can't hurt him," Nytethorn said, still on the ceiling. "Go, all of you, by the Bodkin King. Stay there for now."

"Don't need to tell me twice," Wynston said, sliding his blade back underneath the wrappings of his forearm.

"Come on, Norrica," Miles said, grabbing Norrica by the hand.

"Of course..." Norrica agreed, her eyes on Nytethorn.

All three of them hurried over to the Bodkin King, still standing by his crown, watching the scene in complete disbelief.

"Any one of you want to tell me what's going on here?" the Bodkin King asked, scratching his head.

"I wish I knew," Miles said. "If you don't mind my asking, King, sir, who's the man with the mask and cane?"

"That would be Penumbriss," the Bodkin King replied, gravely. "He's the Acting Captain of the Turncoats and Second Commander of the Shades, second only to Darkshade himself. The way I see it, Penumbriss is the one doing all the planning, the plotting so Darkshade doesn't have to. I think he'd

turn around and stab Darkshade in the back in a moment, if he thought he could get away with it.”

“Captain of the Turncoats,” Wynston said. “What, they don’t make coats the wrong way in his size?” The Bodkin King shrugged.

“That doesn’t answer the question of who the other masked fellow is, though,” the Bodkin King said.

“Oh, that’s Nytethorn,” Miles explained. “Don’t worry about him, he’s on our side.”

“So what were you doing with Penumbriss in the first place?” Norrica asked. “Doesn’t seem like the kind of person I’d want to talk to if I didn’t have to.”

“We’re in agreement there, then,” the Bodkin King said. “He arrived the nyte before and told me I had until the next full moon to evacuate the Keep before his Shades would come through, looking for Masked Dreams. I got everyone out of the place yesterday, but I’m almost certain there aren’t any Masked Dreams to be had here. I tried telling him that, but he’s not the type who easily believes what he doesn’t want to hear.”

The four of them looked back at the ongoing battle. Nytethorn, now on the ground, kept trying to encircle Penumbriss with his black vines, but every time Penumbriss tipped his hat, he would flit from one corner of the room to the other. He unsheathed his cane-blade and sliced with it in the same fluid stroke, which Nytethorn evaded just in time. Penumbriss slid the sword back into the stick and paced around Nytethorn, waiting for a chance to strike.

“Why can’t I touch him?” Wynston asked. “Miles, tell me everything you know about your Nytethorn friend.”

“There’s not a lot to tell, really. Met him in a little forest just outside the Facility. He’s often very mysterious, and...oh, you remember how you hear

strange noises when I say certain words?” Wynston nodded. “Nytethorn can hear them just fine. And I think Penumbriiss can too.”

“Interesting...” Wynston said. “But what’s the connection?”

“Oh no!” Norrica cried. A number of Shades skulked out of the shadows, and began to leap atop Nytethorn. One, and then two didn’t seem to be trouble, but the more that jumped into the pile, the more it seemed as though Nytethorn would be trapped.

“Maybe I can’t touch the masked one,” Wynston said, “but I can sure splinter a Shade’s mask without a problem. I’m helping him. You coming, Your Highness?” The Bodkin King gnawed on the little metal rod, irritably.

“No, I’m not much use for these things anymore,” he said, sadly. “A curse really takes it out of you.”

“I’m all out of Solarix Dreams,” Norrica said, checking all of her pockets. “And Ephemera are no good on Shades; they can’t be tricked by what isn’t there.”

“With all due respect, Bodkin King,” Miles started, “I bet you’d be a tremendous help. I trust Wynston, but you have to admit, that’s a lot of Shades.”

“There’s a *curse*, I said,” the Bodkin King repeated, disdainfully. “I haven’t been of any help to anyone in years, I don’t see why that should be about to change.”

“You really *do* sound like him,” Miles said. Wynx nodded. “Please, anything you could...”

“End of discussion,” the Bodkin King said. He slumped back on his former crown, now his throne, and sat there, chewing on the tiny metal stick.

“Well, King or no King, I’m going in there,” Wynston said. With a flip, he bounded over another broken bench and sprung forward.

Penumbriss appeared in front of him instantly, his hat tipped.

“Interfering in these matters would be profoundly unwise,” he warned. The Shades behind him were beginning to fuse into a black, liquid mass, crushing Nytethorn to the castle floor.

“Oh? And why would you say that?” Wynston asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” Penumbriss said, as he had his blade unsheathed and pointed at Wynston’s throat in a fraction of a second. Wynston slowly raised his arms.

Penumbriss pulled his arm back, ready to strike.

“Miles!” Norrica cried, as she tried to stop him from running forwards.

Miles slid on his side, stopping himself right in front of Wynston. Wynx did his best growl.

“Now why would you do something like that, Miles?” Penumbriss asked, his voice honeyed once more. It made Miles sick.

“There’s something you want from me, isn’t there?” Miles asked.

“You’ve got no problem hurting any of my friends, but you won’t touch me. So tell me what is.” Penumbriss sheathed his weapon once more.

“Oh, it’s not that simple,” he said, kneeling down to come face to face with Miles once more. “But you shouldn’t be so careless. People get hurt that way.” He put his gloved hand back on Miles’ shoulder.

“Don’t touch him!” The Bodkin King commanded, from his crown.

“I’m sorry if I frighten you,” Penumbriss continued, ignoring the Bodkin King completely. “It’s just...it’s very difficult, when you see the world the way I do. Through the eyes of this mask...Nyte is a very different place.”

“That good-for-nothing...” The Bodkin King started as he rose from his seat.

Wynston was now hacking at the gelatinous ball of blackness suffocating

Nytethorn, but with little luck; all of the masks were floating in the bubble's center, past where his blade would be of any use.

"You've taken my Keep, scared away my subjects, and to top it all off, you're going to hurt these poor travelers," the Bodkin King bellowed down the hall. "I've had enough, and I think it's time for you to go."

"Oh?" Penumbriss asked, looking over Miles' shoulder. "And whatever gave you that impression?"

Grabbing the bag of Nytemare seeds right from Norrica's pocket, the Bodkin King tipped his head back and emptied the entire bag right into his mouth. After making a rather disgusting noise with his throat, he proceeded to spit one of the seeds across the room like a bullet. It shot right through the bubble into one of the Shade's masks, which silently separated into pieces.

A quantity of black fluid melted off of the mass and into the floor.

The Bodkin King fired the rest of the seeds the same way, making a sound like a typewriter as each seed burrowed into the oozing blob and destroyed another mask. Before long, the entire mass had become a puddle, and Nytethorn rose from his feet as his vines curled around him, coiled and ready to snap.

"The game's up, Penumbriss," Nytethorn said, still in his strangely cold tone. "Leave this place."

Penumbriss stared at Nytethorn for some time, then turned back to Miles.

"We'll meet again, Miles. I'm sure of it," Penumbriss said. He tipped his hat once more, and this time, his image became more and more hazier until it disappeared completely.

"We did it!" Wynston shouted, throwing his hands up in victory. "I can't believe we're still alive."

“All thanks to a very special Bodkin King,” Nytethorn said, reeling all of his vines in back beneath his cape. Miles noticed that the fun quality had returned to his voice; he’d have to ask him about that, later.

“Not really,” the Bodkin King said, meekly. “Any Bodkin boy or girl can spit Nytemare seeds just as well, if not better.”

“But after yelling at him like that! I thought you were very heroic.” Norrica said. “You all were. That was fantastic!”

“Now, if it’s not too much trouble, the boy wants to ask you a question,” Wynston said.

“Anything,” the Bodkin King said. “Anything at all.”

“I’d like to know how to get home,” Miles said. “I like it here in Nyte, I really do, but I’ve realized I can’t get back home as easily as I thought I could, which in turn, made me realize that I don’t know how to get back home at all.”

“And where are you from, exactly?” The Bodkin King asked.

“He’s from beyond the stars,” Nytethorn answered. “Any ideas how to get back there?”

“Can’t say as I do,” the Bodkin King replied. “Beyond the stars? How did you even end up here, then? Just fell down on a shooting star?”

“Something like that,” Miles said.

“So let’s ask *you* then,” Wynston said, turning to Nytethorn. “Since you seem to know so much about everything. How does he get back, Nytethorn? Riddle me that!”

“Wynston, calm down,” Miles said.

“No, I’m sick of all this silly mysteriousness for no good reason. You know how he can get back to where he’s from, don’t you?” Nytethorn stayed silent. “Tell him, then. Tell him how to get back home.”

“Wynston!” Norrica cried. “Don’t be like this.”

“He’s right,” Nytethorn said. “I do know how you can get back home, Miles. But you can’t leave yet. There’s more you have to do here, you understand?”

“Then just tell me, and I’ll go back home later.” Miles said.

“I’m afraid I can’t take that chance,” Nytethorn confessed. “If you free Nyte, Miles, I promise I’ll give you the answers you’re looking for. How does that sound?”

“‘Free Nyte?’” Wynston asked, mockingly. “What is this garbage? Miles, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. This is unbelievable.”

“You want me to stop Darkshade, don’t you?” Miles asked. “I’m not sure I can. I’m just a kid, Nytethorn.”

“You’re a kid with some very powerful friends,” Nytethorn said, looking around the room. “Besides, you’re not ‘just a kid’. You’re something of a hero yourself, Miles, whether you choose to accept it or not.”

“So if I stop Darkshade, you’ll show me how to get home?” Miles asked one last time, to clarify.

“Darkshade’s a start,” Nytethorn said.

“A start? A *start!*” Wynston yelled. “Listen to this guy! Am I the only person who thinks this is absolutely crazy?”

“It’s a deal,” Miles said. Wynx chirped and jumped up and down excitedly; he seemed pleased by the agreement as well.

“You’ve made me happier than you can imagine, Miles. Darkshade’s staying in the ruins of the Tower of Aganee, as is Penumbriiss, so be careful.”

“The only way to the Tower of Aganee is through the northernmost part of the Glens, in the east,” the Bodkin King explained. “You can get the Laifkin here to guide you, she’ll know her way around the Glens.”

“Why have me do it, when we could have someone who was there

himself?” Norrica asked.

“You’re not getting me to go on this crazy adventure. I’ve had enough of those for this lifetime,” the Bodkin King said.

“Please,” Miles pleaded. “We could have died here if it wasn’t for you. Please, Your Highness, this adventure won’t be *that* crazy. Will it, Nytethorn?”

“I’m not making any promises,” Nytethorn replied.

“Well, I still think this is complete insanity,” Wynston said. “Take on *Darkshade*? With just us? I could have just let the Phears eat me back at the Facility, could have saved myself a whole bunch of time and trouble.”

“But you didn’t,” Miles said. “And now you’re here, and if anyone can save the world, it’s us. Didn’t a Nytefolk, a Bodkin, and a Laifkin save the world years ago or something?” The Bodkin King sullenly nodded his head. “This team’s got all that, plus me, Wynx, and Nytethorn. We can’t lose!”

“I’ll try to pop in more,” Nytethorn said. “I’ve just got so much to keep track of now, it’s a bit overwhelming. It was an honor to finally make your acquaintance, Your Highness.” Nytethorn bowed dramatically, and Norrica followed suit. Miles did the same, and Wynston reluctantly got on one knee.

“The honor was mine,” the Bodkin King said, bowing his head. “Now, if we’re going to be traveling together, we need to get over this grumblerub. It’s just a title, is all.”

When they rose to their feet, they saw Nytethorn was nowhere to be found.

“That overgrown Nytemare!” Wynston shouted. “Always running away like that; does he think he’s impressing anyone with that all the time?”

“Why are you so mistrusting all the time?” Norrica shouted back. “Can’t you just accept someone’s help?” The two of them began bickering.

The Bodkin King turned to Miles and Wynx, and shook his head.

“Let’s get going before I decide to change my mind,” he said.