



CHAPTER ONE

THE SWAMP

THE SWAMP WAS HOT, moist, and silent. For a long time, nothing moved except groping tendrils of fog, playing over the muck and twisting between the hunch-backed trees. An occasional dragonfly skimmed through the reeds on crystalline wings. Overhead, the sun was fat and orange, motionless as if it had been nailed to the pale blue sky.

Then, in the distance, there was the sound of raised voices, and the rustle of someone moving through the underbrush. The dragonflies scattered. A moment later, one of the fogbanks quivered and disgorged a girl, picking her way with caution along a spit of what passed for solid ground.

She was twelve or thirteen, dressed in practical trousers and a leather vest, with her hair tied up to keep it out of the way. She was sweating freely, her pale, freckled cheeks already reddening in the sun, but her eyes were alert, scanning the trees and hollows around her.

Sitting on her shoulder was a small gray cat. His claws were fastened into her vest with desperate strength, as though he was terrified of falling off. Insofar as a cat can have an expression, this one looked very unhappy.

The girl and the cat were named Alice and Ashes-Drifting-Through-the-Dead-Cities-of-the-World (or Ashes, for short), respectively. When they reached the top of the hummock, Alice stopped and turned in a slow circle, while Ashes lashed his tail in an irritable sort of way. It was the cat who finally broke the awkward silence that had grown up between them.

“What,” he said, “are we doing here?”

“We’re looking for some kind of monster,” Alice said. Her master, Geryon, had told her what it was called, some complicated Latin name, but she hadn’t committed it to memory. “I’ve got to fight it. *You* know.”

“I know why *you’re* here. This seems like exactly the sort of place you *would* visit, all mucky water and mud

and monsters. What I want to know is why *I* should have to be here. I'm half cat, after all. I should be above this sort of thing."

"*You* are here because you did your business in Master Geryon's slippers," Alice said. "Again."

"He has no proof of that," Ashes said, tail whipping against the back of her neck.

"There are hardly a lot of suspects," she said.

"Hmph," Ashes snorted.

"You should be glad Geryon didn't turn you into a toad."

"If he had to send me to babysit you," the cat said, "why did it have to be somewhere so . . . wet?"

"You should have seen the last place," Alice muttered. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to get into a swimming pool again. "Now be quiet. I need to concentrate."

There was a rustle in the bushes, farther on, and a small creature emerged. It looked a bit like a wingless bird, with an oval body balanced on two clawed feet and a long, pointed beak. The sleek black coat that covered it was fur, though, and not feathers.

It was called a swarmer, and Alice knew that it was not, in fact, a separate creature at all, but only a part of a larger

entity, like an ant or a bumblebee. The Swarm had been the first creature she'd bound, back when she'd known nothing of Readers or magic and she'd accidentally stumbled into a prison-book. The individual swarmers could be almost cute, but she couldn't quite forget the sound of hundreds of them running after her, claws *tiktiktiking* on the stone floor as they *quirked* for blood.

Right now she was using a few of them to scout, since the creature that occupied *this* prison-book was not being terribly cooperative. She could, after much practice, peer through their eyes without letting her real body fall over, but she still wasn't good at dealing with more than one of them at once. It didn't help that they were poorly suited to the swamp—they were heavier than they looked, and every time one of them stepped into a puddle, it sank to the bottom like a stone and had to scramble to get out.

Alice herself was far from keen on the swamp, as a matter of fact. It was like the water and the land had gotten mixed up, somehow. Even the dry bits were covered in thick, sticky mud, and the innumerable channels and shallow ponds were covered with floating weeds that made them look just like land until she put her foot in them and muddy water poured into her boot. To top things off, the

mosquitoes were eating her alive, and her sunburned skin stung whenever she squashed one.

She checked her swarmers, one by one, but all they could really see were more weeds, a disadvantage of being only a foot high. *This isn't working.* She sighed and let them pop out of existence.

At least now I can do something about the mosquitoes. At the back of her mind were the threads of magic that led to her bound creatures. A silver thread for the Swarm, a deep nut-brown one for the tree-sprite, and a deep blue one for her latest acquisition: a big, toothy creature Geryon had called a devilfish, which could let her glow in the dark or breathe underwater.

Beneath them all, at the very edge of her mental reach, a final thread coiled in rings of darkest obsidian. That one led to the Dragon, which had remained stubbornly impervious to her every attempt to summon or command it.

Alice mentally wrapped the Swarm thread around herself, giving her skin the tough, rubbery resilience of the little creatures. *The next bug that tries to take a bite out of me is going to be very surprised.* Then she opened her eyes and stared around the fetid, baking swamp, frowning.

"This isn't right," she said. "The creature isn't sup-

posed to *hide*. In every other prison-book the thing was champing at the bit for a fight.”

“Perhaps this one’s shy,” Ashes said. “Or perhaps I shouldn’t have come with you. It may be deterred by my magnificent presence. I am very intimidating, after all.” He yawned. “Yes, that’s probably it. Why don’t you leave me in that tree, and you can get on with things while I have a nice little nap?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Can’t you . . . sniff it out or something?”

The cat’s fur bristled. “I think you may have mistaken me for some sort of *hound*.”

“Don’t be silly,” Alice said. She put on a sly smile. “I just figured that whatever a stupid *dog* could do, you’d be able to do better. Being half cat, and all.”

“I can see what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work,” Ashes said. “Don’t think you can bait me.”

“Fair enough, fair enough. I’ve been thinking of asking Geryon if I could have a puppy anyway.”

“A puppy?” Ashes sputtered.

“A golden retriever, maybe. You two would look so cute together. I can just see him licking your face with his big slobbery tongue—”

"All right, all *right*," Ashes said. "You don't have to get gruesome."

"Then you can smell something?"

"In this muck? Not a chance." His whiskers twitched, and he shut his eyes. "If you'll be quiet for a moment, though, I may be able to *hear* something. We half-cats have excellent ears." One eye cracked, just slightly, so he could glare at her. "Much better than any *canine*."

Alice suppressed a giggle, and stood in silence while Ashes' ears twitched and pivoted, like tiny searchlights. Eventually he raised a paw and pointed.

"I don't know if it's what we're looking for," he said, "but I can hear something big breathing, over in that direction."

"That's probably it," Alice said. "These prison-books never seem to have much life beyond the prisoner." Though why this one included *mosquitoes* was beyond Alice. She started down the hillock in the direction Ashes indicated, probing ahead of her with the toe of her boot to make sure of her footing. The mud sucked at her feet with every step, but fortunately Geryon had provided her with a pair of very fine leather boots; her ordinary shoes would have been lost to the mire long ago.

She came to a stream, a channel of deeper, fast-running water moving through the muck, and hopped across it on a pair of convenient rocks. Ahead, the plants grew taller and closer together, forming an impenetrable thicket. Alice glanced at Ashes, and he nodded in that direction.

"I don't see anything," she said.

"It's in there somewhere."

"Are you sure?"

The cat only sniffed haughtily. Alice sighed and pulled the Swarm thread a little tighter around herself for protection, then crept forward.

There *was* something in there, deep inside the curling branches. A solid dark mass, like a hump of stone. But it was watching her. She edged sideways, and saw the shape move, a fraction of a degree.

"I see it," Alice said. "Hold on."

Ashes didn't bother to answer, but his claws were tiny pinpricks against her skin, even through the vest. Alice took another step forward, and another, then halted when the half-hidden creature shifted. It gave a low *chuff*, like a car engine starting up.

Then, all at once, it exploded into motion. Alice hadn't expected it to be so *fast*—it crashed out of the thicket in

a blur of frantic motion. She got the sense of something gray and compact, with legs working frantically and wicked, pointed horns aimed directly at her.

The Alice of a year ago would have panicked. She'd only read about ferocious creatures in books or seen them at the zoo, safely behind bars. But that Alice no longer existed. *This* Alice was a year older and had spent the last six months as a Reader's apprentice. In that capacity she'd been squashed, drowned, frozen, and otherwise nearly killed more times than she could count, and it took considerably more than a charging monster to faze her.

None of this meant that she was *stupid*, however, and she threw herself to one side at the last moment, giving the thing no time to adjust its path. The creature took quite a while to slow down once it realized it had missed, skidding through the mud and sending up a wave of dirt and pebbles as it slewed to a halt.

It was, she saw, now that she got a good look at it, a dinosaur. Not a terribly large one, certainly—its shoulders were a bit higher than Alice's head, which put its eyes just about level with hers. It had a lumpy, pebble-skinned body and four stumpy, powerful legs, with broad flat feet

like an elephant's. A short tail whipped back and forth, like an excited dog's. Most notable, though, was the massive crest running back from its head, from which sprouted four long, curving horns that stretched out past its beady black eyes and bird-like beak. Most of it was a dark gray, but the horns faded to pure white at the ends, and the tips looked very sharp.

One foot pawed the ground, which put Alice in mind of a bull, getting ready to charge. She got to her feet, slowly, brushing chunks of mud from her trousers.

"Okay," she said. "Now we know what we're dealing with. Are you all right?"

There was a silence. Alice felt the distinct absence of weight from her shoulder.

"Ashes?" She kept her eyes glued to the dinosaur's, waiting for it to make a move. "Where are you?"

"Here," came the cat's voice, a bit higher than normal.

"Where?"

"*Here.*"

Alice finally spotted him. One of the lumps on the creature's pebbled gray skin moved, revealing itself to be a small gray cat hanging on for dear life. All his fur was standing on end, and his tail stuck straight up like a flag.

"How did you get *there*?"



"I'm not exactly sure," Ashes said. "I thought you might get clobbered, so I abandoned ship, so to speak, and grabbed the first thing I could get a hold of."

"Your faith in me is astounding," Alice said.

"I thought perhaps getting clobbered was part of your plan," Ashes said. "You always come up with the cleverest plans. Now will you please *get me down from here?*"

Alice took a step to the left, and the dinosaur turned to face her, still pawing the ground. She could see its hind-quarters tensing as it prepared to charge.

"That . . . may be a bit difficult," she said. "Can't you jump?"

"I would really rather not."

"In that case, hang on tight."

"*Always* the cleverest plans—"

The dinosaur charged. Ashes' rear legs lost their grip and he scrambled madly to stay on top, his claws making no impression at all on the creature's thick hide. Alice guessed the needle beaks of the Swarm would have a similar lack of effect, so she kept that thread tightly wound around her. She jumped aside again, like a bull-fighter, letting the creature sweep past her and into the long, tangled branches of one of the reedy swamp trees.

Before it could turn, Alice yanked on the tree-sprite thread in her mind and grabbed a branch, extending her power through it and into the main body of the tree. It was a thin, unhappy plant, eking out a bare existence in the drowned soil and constant fog, but it responded to the tree-sprite's magic and came alive under Alice's hand. The long, wispy branches snapped out and lashed themselves around the dinosaur, wrapping its thick body in green. She guided them around Ashes, who had maintained his perch by virtue of sinking his fangs into the back of the creature's neck.

The dinosaur struggled, tossing its head and snapping branches with its horns, but more and more limbs cocooned it as the tree bent forward like a vegetable spider. It gave a frustrated roar and turned, laboriously, toward Alice. The thing's strength was incredible; even the little swamp tree could have torn the arms and legs off an ordinary human, but the dinosaur fought its way forward inch by inch. It pulled the branches as far as they could go, straining like a dog at the leash, beak snapping. Alice almost felt sorry for it, trying so hard and getting . . . *nowhere* . . .

There was a *crack*, and the dinosaur inched a foot

forward. Another branch tore with a wet *snap*, then two more. Ashes, who had been cautiously examining the possibility of making a jump to the ground, leaped back and grabbed on with all four legs. Alice moved away as far as she could while maintaining her focus on the tree, throwing all her power into pulling the dinosaur down.

But it was tearing free. No matter how tight she held on, the endurance of the little dinosaur seemed endless. One by one, and then in bunches, the fronds gave up the unequal struggle and tore. When half of them were gone, the trunk of the swamp tree, as thick as Alice's thigh, started to bend. Then, all at once, it broke in half with a *crack* like a gunshot, and the creature was free.

"Time for another plan, I think!" Ashes shouted.

The dinosaur shook the ragged ends of the tree branches off itself and glared at Alice with small, dark eyes. Alice stared back at it for a moment, then turned and ran.

"What are you doing?" Ashes shouted.

"Thinking!" Alice shouted back.

"Think faster!"

Branches whipped at her face, but her Swarm-toughened skin kept her from feeling the impacts. She was more concerned about tripping on the slippery,

muddy ground. The dinosaur was pounding along behind her, and rubber skin wouldn't help if it got her with those horns.

In a straightaway, the race would have been no contest. In spite of its stubby legs, the horned monster's tremendous strength could generate a considerable turn of speed, and if it was getting tired at all, it didn't show. Alice was already winded, and she only stayed ahead by ducking and dodging around bushes and past tree trunks, leaping lightly over narrow puddles and splashing through larger ones. The dinosaur skidded back and forth in her wake like a car trying to drive on a sheet of ice, legs kicking up sprays of goopy mud.

Think faster. She might be able to grow a tree to the size and thickness it would need to capture the thing, but that would take time she didn't have. *Besides, Ashes might get hurt. I need something quicker—*

The sound of running water came from ahead of her. It was the stream she'd crossed earlier, a clear, deep channel amidst the brackish standing water of the swamp. At the sight of it, she put her head down and summoned a burst of speed, breaking between a couple of trees with the dinosaur still right on her tail.

When she reached the bank, Alice jumped, aiming for

a nice big pool created by a fallen log and hoping desperately she wasn't about to break her leg against a rock. She hit the water with a mighty splash, the sound of which almost drowned out Ashes' plaintive cries.

"Oh, no. No, no, no, I don't like this plan, think harder, Aliiiiiice—"

Then she was underwater. The stream was as warm as bathwater, and tasted faintly of sulfur and dirt. The pool was only just deeper than Alice was tall, and swimming in all her clothes was harder than she'd expected. She fought through the clanging dimness, waiting—

The dinosaur followed her in, only moments later. She wasn't sure if it had wanted to or not, but it had been moving far too quickly to stop itself on the muddy ground, so it had ended up in the stream whatever its intention. It thrashed and wriggled, only a few feet away from her, surrounded by a froth of white water and bubbles.

The very first time Alice had ever fought a creature, she'd managed to trap it in deep water until it drowned. It was immediately obvious, though, that this was not going to be an exact reprise of that victory. The dinosaur righted itself quickly, and unlike the swarmers, it could swim, if only in a clumsy dog paddle. The water wasn't deep enough or wide enough for Alice to hide for long.

Fortunately, Alice had no intention of hiding. She had acquired a few tricks since that first night, and now she reached for the deep blue thread that led to the last creature she'd conquered. Letting the Swarm thread go, she wrapped the devilfish thread around herself, over and over until its power flooded through her body and she began to change.

There was a nauseating moment of *fluidity* between forms, but then her new body settled into place. She'd become an enormous, vicious-looking fish with a broad, fan-shaped tail and hundreds of tiny needle-sharp teeth. Patches of scales on her flanks glowed, turning the pool into a weird, flickering nightmare of shadow and unearthly green radiance, but the dinosaur was easily visible as it paddled toward shore. With a flick of her tail, Alice-the-fish surged forward, her jaw opening wide.

The dinosaur heard her coming, and lowered its horns in her direction, but in this form Alice was far more agile in the water. She darted easily around the clumsy thing and went for its shoulder, farther back than it could twist its head to snap at her. The strength in the devilfish's jaw was immense, and it felt like the easiest thing in the world to drive those hundreds of teeth through tough, scaly skin and into muscle. Blood filled Alice's mouth;

had she still been a girl, she would have gagged, but to the fish, the taste was heavenly.

Instead of ripping and tearing, as a real fish might have, Alice *pulled*. The dinosaur was a clumsy swimmer, and though it thrashed its legs, it was unable to resist being drawn back and *down* into the center of the pool until its head was completely underwater. Once she had it there, there was nothing to do but wait for it to give in. The creature's struggles became increasingly frantic, but Alice felt nothing but comfortable, warm water sluicing easily through her gills.

Submit, she thought at the dinosaur, extending her will. *Submit*. She could escape the prison-book by killing the prisoner, but she didn't like to do that if she didn't have to, even if it was only a dumb animal. Even the stupidest creatures, she'd found, could understand the concept of dominance.

Eventually, the dinosaur got the message. She could feel its resistance collapse, the essence of its spirit twining out into a thread that would be forever linked to her. As it did, the world began to fade away as the magic of the prison-book recognized that she'd accomplished her task and sent her back to where she'd come from.

When reality snapped back, for a horrible moment

she was drowning, choking, flopping wildly in a strange, alien environment. Hurriedly, she unwrapped the devil-fish thread. A moment later, she was a girl again, lying on her back and gasping for breath, dripping muddy water onto Geryon's study rug.



CHAPTER TWO

THE WAY FORWARD

WELL DONE,” SAID GERYON. He was at his desk, writing something, and he didn’t look up.

It took Alice a moment to gather enough breath to sit up. Being a fish left her feeling a bit wobbly, and she had to concentrate to remember how her hands and feet worked. By the time she’d gotten a hold of herself, Geryon had laid his pen carefully aside and turned around.

“Are you all right?” His voice was devoid of sympathy. As ever, Geryon could have passed for a jolly old grandpa—shabby, ink-stained clothes, flyaway gray hair and wild, bushy sideburns—except for his eyes. They were dark, exacting, and intelligent, forever the eyes of

a master sitting in judgment. Geryon had helped Alice—saved her, really, from the fairy Vespidian and the other agents of the old Readers who wanted to kidnap her—but when she met his gaze, it reminded her that he was not in any sense her friend.

“I’m fine, sir,” Alice said. “Just winded.” She looked around. “Ashes? Are you okay?”

There was no answer, and Alice had a moment of worry. Ashes had probably gone into the stream along with the dinosaur, but she hadn’t seen him when she’d dragged the creature under. *He must have gotten away. Cats can swim, right?*

Then she heard a long, low, growl, and sighted a dark shape huddled under one of the leather armchairs. Alice bent to peer beneath it, and a paw swiped out, nearly catching her on the nose.

“Alice!” Ashes spat, furious. “How is it every time we go on one of these expeditions *I* end up getting *wet*? You’re doing it on purpose!”

“Nothing else occurred to me at the time,” Alice said. “It’s not like I didn’t get soaked too.”

“It’s different for you fur-less apes!” Ashes squirmed out from under the chair. Alice had to admit he made

for a pathetic sight, his sodden fur clumped in tufts and his tail still dripping. He began furiously licking one paw. "Blech! I'll be tasting mud for a week!"

"I'm sorry," Alice said.

"No you're not. You're already thinking how you can dunk me again!"

Ashes shook himself and stalked out the door. It is impossible for a soaked cat to stalk with any degree of dignity, but Alice held her chuckle until he was gone. Even Geryon's face was touched with a fleeting smile.

"I think your punishment was effective, sir," Alice said. "Although it might have been a bit harsh."

"Chastising Ashes was a secondary concern," Geryon said. "There will always be times when you must worry about defending others, in addition to yourself. I thought the experience would prove valuable."

Alice swallowed and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You have the creature's thread?"

"Yes, sir." Alice could feel it, a twisting cord the color of yellowed ivory, at the back of her mind with the others.

"Can you summon its power?"

She was tired from the fight, but Alice took hold of the dinosaur's thread and wrapped it around herself. It required considerable strength.

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. How do you feel?”

Looking down at herself, Alice could see nothing obvious had changed. She raised her hand, then took a cautious step.

“As though I were almost weightless, sir.”

“It is your strength that has increased. Try lifting the chair.”

She took hold of the armchair, a heavy wood-and-leather thing that looked like it dated from the previous century. Ordinarily, just pushing it across the floor would have been hard, but she was delighted to find that it came easily off the ground in her grip, as though it were made of straw. It creaked as she held it over her head in one hand, shedding dust everywhere.

“Very good,” Geryon said. “The enhancements of the body are crude tricks, but essential. A Reader should never be balked in a task by mere physical barriers. Let the thread go.”

“Yes, sir.” Alice put the chair down and let the dinosaur’s power slip away. She felt as though she’d suddenly put on a lead coat.

“A word of warning. Lifting things is all well and good, but running and jumping with amplified strength take a

bit of practice. I encourage you to experiment, but do so carefully.”

Alice wondered how high she could jump, with the dinosaur’s power coiled in her legs, and resolved to try it at the first opportunity. *If I have something soft to land on.* “Yes, sir.”

“That will be all. You may have the rest of the day free.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Geryon waved her away, already turning back to his writing. Alice left the study, still dripping muddy water, and headed straight for the bath. Ashes was right—there were definitely advantages to being human, and not having to *lick* herself clean was one of them.

It had been six months since Mr. Black, Geryon’s right-hand man, had picked her up at the train station in his ancient Model T. She’d arrived at the Library alone in a world that had started fraying dangerously at the edges. She’d gotten hold of a loose thread, that night she’d first seen Vespidian threatening her father. When she’d given it a tug, to her surprise and horror, the whole fabric of normality had crumbled to bits like rotten cloth. Underneath was . . . something else.

She'd started working in the endless magical library, guarded by a giant black cat who seemed to be made out of shadows. She'd learned to do magic, and she'd nearly died, twice. It was amazing how anything—even the Library, with its talking cats and invisible servants—could become routine. Even when your whole world had come to pieces, eventually it all came down to what you had to get done today before bedtime, and tomorrow, and the next day.

Every morning now, she had a brief chat with her master, and he would set the day's task for her. Sometimes it was basic work: gathering scraps of magic from the books for Mr. Wurms or fetching and carrying things the scholar needed. Other times, Geryon would interest himself in her training, watching her practice with her summoned creatures or showing her some trick. Alice got the sense she was doing well in this regard; Geryon seemed pleased, at least, and she had no other yardstick by which to gauge her progress.

More rarely, the old Reader would send her on what he called "errands," through one of the many portal-books in the wild back reaches of the library. For the most part these involved picking up or dropping off packages. Alice

had gotten the sense, talking to Ashes, that there was a kind of highly paranoid economy among the old Readers. They would agree to trade one book or artifact for another, but the actual exchange couldn't be done in any of their libraries, since no Reader would risk visiting another in the seat of his power. It had to be done on neutral ground, somewhere out in one of the book-worlds. Other times, Geryon would send her just to look at something, and report back what she had found. She was never sure which of these tasks were things he really needed, and which were simply tests, so she applied herself diligently to all of them.

As a result, she had now been to more worlds than she could easily count. Some of them were ordinary, with forests and hills and grasslands, with only an extra moon or strange stars overhead to show her that she wasn't on Earth somewhere. Others were strange—blasted expanses of black rock, a forest of trees carved from marble, down to the smallest detail, a world of solid clouds and great, arching vines connecting them.

Alice was still determined to discover what had really happened to her father, but with no obvious leads to pursue, she'd had to make a longer-term plan. His disap-

pearance had to be tied in with the world of the Readers, somehow, and so she threw herself into learning everything she could of their strange society and the powers they wielded. It was the sort of plan he would have approved of: When you aren't sure what to do, you ought to gather as much information as you can.

She wondered, though, if he would have approved of her work with Geryon. She wasn't sure *she* approved of it. Going into prison-books to force the creatures inside to submit to her—or killing them if they refused—still felt wrong somehow, though since her moment of defiance in the world of the tree-sprite, Geryon had not tested her against anything remotely intelligent or human-looking. “He is a Reader,” Ending had said of Geryon. “His magic is based on cruelty and death.” She half suspected her father would agree.

But this is the way forward. Emma, Geryon's mindless, obedient maidservant with her vacant eyes, was always there to remind Alice of the only other way out.

She hadn't had an afternoon off in a while. She thought about trying to catch up on her reading—there was a small and rather eclectic collection of books she'd borrowed from the library on her desk—but the sight of

the sun pouring through her window changed her mind. She shrugged into a light jacket and went downstairs.

Pittsburgh's summer had been hot but brief, and now, at the end of October, fall was well enough along that it wasn't unusual to find frost on her windowpane in the morning. Now and again, though, the forces of the departing season seemed to rally for a last effort, and you got days like this one, with perfect golden autumn afternoons, just chilly enough to put red in your cheeks. A line of clouds darkened the sky to the west, suggesting the break in the weather wouldn't last, but for now it felt just right.

Alice wandered across the lawn that separated the Library mansion from the library building proper, which seemed like a good enough place to practice. She grabbed the dinosaur's thread and pulled it toward her, testing how much strain it put on her mental grip. More, she decided, than any of the creatures she had bound so far, but to her surprise it was well within the limits of her strength. Geryon had said her power would grow with practice, but this was the first time she'd realized it was actually happening.

The dinosaur appeared beside her and made a noise

that was half rumble and half honk, like a goose with a sore throat. Alice walked around it, giving it a leisurely inspection like a field marshal looking over his troops, then sent it walking toward the trees. Like most of the creatures she met, it was considerably more appealing when it wasn't trying to kill her. In spite of its size—Alice thought she might be able to *ride* it, although probably not for long—it had an endearingly doglike quality about it.

Spike, Alice decided. *I think I will call him Spike.* Though, for all she knew, Spike was a girl; she had no idea how one could tell, with dinosaurs.

She sent him rushing about, short tail swishing, getting a feel for how fast he could move and turn. Then, with a bit of hesitation, she turned him loose, ordering him to charge straight at the trunk of a great old oak on the other side of the clearing.

The results were spectacular. Spike's stubby legs got him up to full speed surprisingly quickly, and he lowered his head with its four horns and bony crest just before impact, slamming against the wood with an explosion of splinters and torn bark. Spike bounced back a foot and shook his head, slightly dazed from the blow, but the tree

gave a tremendous *crack* and split where the dinosaur had struck it. The crown of the oak tipped sideways to lean drunkenly against its neighbor and the canopy shuffled and shed a torrent of yellow and brown leaves.

"I'm not sure Master Geryon would appreciate you destroying the foliage," said Ashes.

Alice looked around until she found him, lying on his back on a thick tree branch at the edge of the forest, soaking up the setting sun and looking at her, upside down.

"I needed some room to practice," Alice said. Plus, though she'd never say it aloud, these days sometimes she just wanted to break something. She let Spike vanish with a loud *pop* and reached for the tree-sprite thread. "Besides, I can fix it."

"It's so hard to resist playing with a new toy."

Alice glared at him, a little embarrassed, because that was exactly what she *had* been doing. She didn't like to think of her creatures that way, though. Her father had always taught her that living creatures were to be respected, and they weren't toys. *They're more like . . . pets.*

But she didn't know how to explain that to what was, after all, a cat, so she just walked over to the broken tree

and put her hand on the trunk. The tree-sprite's power flowed through it, animating the splintered fibers and knitting them back together, and with a great creaking and groaning, the top half of the oak lifted back in position. More leaves fell, spiraling madly to the ground.

"Are you still angry at me, then?" she said to Ashes, when the tree was repaired.

He blinked, and rolled onto his stomach, wiping at his ear with one paw. "Nah. Too much work, and it's too nice a day." The cat yawned. "Just don't do it again."

"I'll do my best," Alice said.

Ashes looked around with exaggerated caution, and lowered his voice. "By the way, Mother said you should come by tomorrow and see the acorns."

Alice blinked, and matched his quiet tone. "Why? Has it worked this time?"

"She didn't tell *me*. Come and see, she said."

That sounded like Ending, all right. The great shadow-cat never said or did something simple if there was a way to make it obscure and complicated. That went hand in hand with being the guardian of a forbidden library, Alice supposed, but it made her frustrating.

Her secrecy also made Alice's relationship with her

master more complicated. As far as Geryon knew, Ending barely talked to Alice; in fact, the black cat often appeared when she was deep in the library on some task, and helped her practice aspects of her magic that Geryon had neglected. Just *why* Ending did this, Alice had no idea, but after the help Ending had offered trapping Vespidian, she didn't feel in a position to refuse.

The other thing Alice had never told Geryon about was Isaac, the other apprentice who'd broken in to the Library, and the way the two of them had worked together to bind the Dragon. Officially, she was still angry with Isaac for the trick he'd played on her, making her think he'd wanted to kiss her when he was only stealing the Dragon book for himself. But she found herself wishing sometimes that he would turn up, so she could be angry with him in person. At night, she found herself reaching out for the Dragon's thread, black and imperturbable as stone. Every so often she could feel the faintest of vibrations through it, and she knew that somewhere, in some world, Isaac was reaching out too.

The sun was slipping behind the trees, and this line of thought made her melancholy. Alice bid Ashes good-bye and went back up to the house to eat the dinner the invisible servants set for her. It was delicious, as always, but

she found she barely tasted it. Her thoughts kept drifting back to her father, and what he would think of what she had become. When she was full, she went upstairs and tried to shake the feeling with a solid dose of last-century German philosophy, always guaranteed to produce a good night's sleep.

Once she was asleep, though, she dreamed.



CHAPTER THREE

CENTRAL PARK

IT WAS A PERFECT autumn afternoon, the air just chilly enough to put a little color in Alice's cheeks, but drenched in golden sunlight that made her feel deliciously warm and sleepy. She lay on a blanket beside the demolished remains of a picnic lunch. Her father sat next to her, his back propped against a tree stump, with his hands behind his head and his hat tipped down over his eyes.

Nobody went to Central Park anymore, or so the common wisdom ran. It was, Alice had to admit, a bit of a dump. Many of the trees were dead, the flowerbeds trampled, and the old wrought-iron benches overturned, lying legs-up like helpless turtles. Bits of trash were every-

where, and torn newspapers fluttered through the air when the wind blew, like tumbleweeds in a Western.

But Alice's father had been coming here for picnic lunches since he'd been a boy accompanying *his* father, and Alice loved the park because her father loved it. He knew all the best spots too, places off the usual paths, where a few trees were still clad in gorgeous red and gold and you could bask in the afternoon sun. A hundred yards away, a fluffy white sheep wandered, looking lost but contented, poking curiously at bits of garbage and tugging at the browning grass.

"Not supposed to be sheep here," Alice's father commented, to no one in particular. "The sheep are down at Sixty-fifth Street." He patted Alice on the shoulder, as though to reassure her. "I imagine someone will be along to collect it presently."

Alice yawned and closed her eyes. She could feel the prickle of the grass through the blanket, and hear the leaves rustling as the wind tugged them one by one from the trees. The sun was warm and soft on her face.

Whenever they came to the park, her father liked to talk to her about whatever was on his mind. Usually that meant business. He would tell her about pools and syndicates and high-leverage investment trusts, the pros-

pects of US Steel and the Shenandoah Corporation. Alice understood most of it only dimly, but she didn't mind. What mattered was that he spoke to her as someone who was every bit as smart and grown-up as he was; in Alice's world of tutors and condescending servants, that was a treasure beyond price.

He'd started out talking about business today, but after a while he'd gone silent. Now, in a quiet voice, he said, "You don't remember Dad, do you?"

Alice shook her head.

"You were only two when he died," her father said. "It's a shame. He would have really liked you. I can see a lot of him in you."

Alice opened one eye and turned to look up at him. "Really?"

"Mmm-hmm. He was a smart man. Very logical." Her father cocked his head and grinned. "And stubborn. 'Never give up,' he would say. Whenever I complained about anything, that I was tired or it was too hard, he just shook his head and said, 'Never give up. Not ever.' It used to make me very angry with him, when I was your age."

Alice had a hard time imagining her father as a boy her age. It was hard to imagine him as anything but what he *was*, the solid, dependable rock around which her life



revolved. It was like wondering what the sun was like, before it was the sun.

“He would have been proud of you,” her father said. He looked out over the park, past the wandering sheep, and sighed.

Something was wrong. Alice could feel it, feel some emotion in her father that she couldn’t quite identify, but she didn’t know what to do. She rolled over and pressed herself against his side, and his hand came down to tangle in her hair.

“You don’t remember your mother either,” he said, so quietly she wasn’t sure he meant her to hear. “But I do. I *remember*.” His voice was sad, but also fierce, full of quiet determination. “Someday . . .”

All Alice could do was hug him a little tighter. He tipped his hat down farther, to shade his eyes, and they sat there in silence until the sun touched the buildings on the West Side and the cold of the breeze began to bite. Then they went home and had chicken pot pies for dinner. They were her father’s favorite, and she loved them because he loved them.

Alice woke up and thought it was before dawn, judging by the gray, dead light, but when she looked outside, she