

# **The Treehouse Castaways**

## **City in the Trees**

**By KG Wiles**

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Part One:  
**Return**



## Chapter One:

# Into the Closet

Elijah Hawthorne plucked twenty-seven pointed hats from his garden beds. Thirteen came from the turnip patch behind the shed, four from the rows of onions he grew in spurts between the rutabagas and rain-flocked cabbages, and two from the stakes that held his green-pea vines which clutched, then, a brackish overgrowth of fungus (a sea-storm then, this far away, or maybe it had come from the dust storms off the salt licks in the north). The last eight clung, burrowed, straddled the sop of his bed of pumpkins, the patch that sat closest to the towering watermill behind the manor.

The manor sat hunched in storm all night; one window lit. In the morning as Eli remedied the yard with a look of utter and permanent discouragement, as the manor shook from itself whole deluges, soaking, again, the gardens below—soaking Eli—the window remained lit.

The storm had spun itself out before the rays of morning showed on the disaster it had spawned below; the storm had sped in and sped back out, as most weather did. Now it was damp and clear. The day before it had been windy but bright enough that Eli had felt compelled to shade the saplings planted in last week's dry spell—a venture meant to combat the coming downpour that often followed a Tuesday fog. Eli saw it like this, if there was rain on a Sunday and sun on the following Wednesday, then a large storm was sure to come by that Thursday in the evening, regardless of whether the clouds trumpeted such omens. But that Sunday there had been very little in the way of rain, and fog had not come in by Tuesday at all, so he had not expected the hot and dry weather that had accompanied the remainder of his week, the sort of weather that was known in other parts of the country to be usual for a late spring but certainly not an early winter, where he found himself.

“Turnabout,” the Men-of-Magic had told him of the fickle weather, when he'd conjured the bravery to ask after some magic that might aid him in his plight (he had grown tired of replanting the same patch of squash each week and having to run to town for new seeds), “there's nothing to be done about it. Not even with magic.”

But magic, he thought, had done this to their town. Now it was left to the Windbreakers to clear what they could of the skies, sending the sloppy grey of the clouds drifting away like the mighty waves that crashed against the cliffs of the south. Now it was left to him and everyone else to deal with it or be boggled. Eli did what he could: pluck, dig, plant, divert, pick, salvage, and pluck again. The gardens hadn't fared well with this particular storm and he was certain there would come another bout of swelling heat—he had to save what he could for the fortuitous turn of weather; there were sales to be made and his aunt didn't like to miss any of those.

He tripped over a stack of hats on his way to the bins with an armful of parsnips, catching sight of the lit window above him. He silently cursed the Men-of-Magic, again, for all their hats—hats in his gardens, hats on the fences, hats in hallways and hats on the kitchen floor; once, when Eli had been very tired and not checked ahead, a hat right in his vegetable soup (he'd taken it for the boiled end of a beet and put it in his mouth before he realized).

He kicked at the hats, letting the breeze draw them in a line back toward the manor. It dawned on him, as he bent back down to pull a rotted stem from between two stalks of corn, that he hadn't seen any Men-of-Magic around all day. The sun picked up over the low hedges and warmed his back. He stooped with an elbow above his brow to peer across first the yard, with its string of red and mauve, then to the manor, and last up to the second-story window where the blaze could be seen peeking through the curtains like a shrewd specter through a veil.

Aunt Meg, in her blaze, high above his head—in her study. Where she spent most of her time, since the Men-of-Magic had come.

But he forced thoughts of that aside.

He moved fast for his legs were as nimble as the darting streams that fed his gardens from the spinning wells on the mill; and his arms were strong. He was strong, though he'd been told in his time that he was small for his age and sometimes people doubted his strength. Even with this strength, even with the calculated understanding he had of his work—of how to work smart—it took him most of the day to tackle the list of to-dos. By sundown he was still finishing up.

The room above him stayed lit. The hats had collected into a heap near the trash to his delight, awaiting their fate. Nobody had come looking for him, or them. Nobody called his name. And his own thoughts filled the space around him like phantoms.

The sun lowered now opposite the bulrushes in the crook of the stream bed. This was behind the main yard, where the watermill stood, moving ferociously as it ferreted off the excess rainfall into the irrigation channels and then off toward the potato fields in the distance, behind the tracks.

He picked his vegetables and, once he'd piled them up, stood staring ahead past the yard to where shadows from both the manor and the watermill marched across the back hill. Those same shadows seemed to follow him as he collected his salvaged harvest into rough-spun sacks, silver shapes playing along the fringes of the yard and dashing out of his view. He sorted as he loaded to save time—even as the sun dropped behind the house—soon shouldering one load after another, taking several trips back and forth from the vegetable patches to the house and back again, struggling with the last few loads. When he finished dropping the vegetables into the bins outside the kitchen, he shook off the caked mud from his pants and stepped inside.

Eli had once heard that the Men-of-Magic roamed the country for work, moving from place to place and flashing their tricks about like a brood of chickens flashing their feathers—for coin, as it goes. This was how they found places to stay, places to eat, and places to study. This was how they found the manor, which provided all three. By the time they rolled into their town in Mole, Aunt Meg had found out

that Eli had a fair amount of luck with the gardens. This brought them plenty of money for the usual expenses (minus that they no longer needed to pay for food), so she didn't need to work. As old as she was, Eli was glad she chose instead to try her hand at some hobbies. It started with sewing things, and once she'd grown bored of that, it was painting, then glassblowing. But Aunt Meg wasn't like the other old women in town. Apparently, she grew as bored as a young schoolgirl, and just as restless.

For this reason, Eli assumed, she had gotten involved beyond the likes of her own abilities. She wasn't a magician after all. But just what she was able to do for the Men-of-Magic, huddled in her study as she was, was something he couldn't figure out.

He crept down the hall in his socks, having left his boots behind, back at the door covered in mud and leaves. When he made it upstairs, he did not find his path to her study blocked, whether by the Men-of-Magic or their shoddy invisible magic walls.

The door to the study was half open, an oddity. He snuck forward and spied the room within, where he found his aunt inside arguing with... no one.

"It has to be there," she said to thin air, "it simply has to be."

If there was another voice speaking back, Eli sure didn't hear it.

"And why can't you check again?"

She slammed a heavy text onto her desk. Eli used the distraction from the noise to slip inside (he wasn't allowed to disturb her in her study). He waited for her to turn around and scare him back out, but she didn't seem to take any notice and went on arguing like there was no one there to argue back, which he was beginning to suspect.

"I'll waste away waiting for you to figure out where it got off to. I suppose you'd like me to believe it sprouted a pair of legs and went giggling down the street. Or got together with a dish and a spoon and—you dare threaten me with that, after all these years... and all the business I've brought your way. I daresay, Pumpernell, you have plum lost your mind if you think I wasn't the one who pulled you and your humble upstart of a profession through the last Red Magic Scare—and here you are telling me I can't return!"

She threw herself into her chair. She pulled down three more texts in place of the one she'd slammed shut and rifled through a dozen pages before continuing, "By the time you get it here I'll be a leftover shell, a sad rhyme in a mythos. You know very well the circumstances. Don't tell me what I should be doing with him—oh, you wait until Magnus hears about this!"

She huffed and her disagreement seemed at an end. "Sundown," she said, leaning back into her chair. "It has to get here by sundown, or else..."

Eli heard her gasp and she spun around to find him there clutching his arm with his hand.

Before he could get scolded, he said, "Aunt Meg?"

She did not answer.

Eli peered through the curtain to the darkened outdoors. Stars clogged the night sky. Darwin sat low, crouching on the horizon, full but for a quarter of it missing in shadow—and the sun a distant half-ring on the hill.

"Aunt Meg?" he said again.

This time she stirred. "What is it, Eli?"

He didn't know what to say.

He stared out the window at a tree outlined against dark cerulean hues. "My chores are all done. I haven't seen a single magician all day. Where did they all go?"

“That’s very nice,” she said, forcing him to frown. She looked back at her books, paying him no more heed than if he were a lamppost.

“Who... who were you talking to just then?”

She swiveled around, startling him. “What do you mean?”

He frowned still deeper. “You were talking to someone, weren’t you?”

She gave him a cold stare, somewhere between annoyance and disbelief.

Eli sunk in the seat.

Then her face changed again, dissolving as it did between the moments of sustained thought— things like surprise or deep anger or even fear. “Oh that.”

Pause.

“I suppose you’d like to know, Eli. I suppose you’d like to know a lot of things. The magicians are out, you say. Oh, how convenient.”

Longer pause. She stood and moved the texts back to their spots on the shelf, pulling another out in their place. She dropped it, like the others, on the desk with an immense thump. “I suppose it couldn’t be helped. This world is filled with the trite and incuriously predisposed, Eli. Not to make a slight where a full offense ought to be more suitable.”

“Oh.”

She went back to ignoring him, peering down at her pages as though she had not lost a second to either conversation.

“Well, can I have it back?” he said, trying to keep some semblance of the conversation going, deciding this part was best asked bluntly. He was, after all, beginning to feel slight and feverish and she had been known to dally with it.

The lamp beside her texts buzzed, cutting off any other noise but Eli’s own breathing. Her hand quavered over the form, which she’d slammed inside the first book, dumped back out when she’d put the text away, and left untouched. This was not the first time he’d seen her act this way.

She stood from her chair. She took the necklace into her hand by the string, crossed the expanse to his waiting form, and set it into his palm. She stared at him as he put it on. She continued to watch him as he fingered the dent in the stone’s side that he’d come to memorize, and then as he tucked the whole of it back beneath his shirt, out of sight.

Eli swallowed, feeling a mixture of relief and nervousness. Relief from its return, nervousness from her searching eyes. “Aunt Meg?” he said, for the third time in about as many minutes.

“I may need you to do something for me tomorrow. It’s of utmost importance.” She straightened her collar. Her eyes were at his face but not for long. They kept returning to the hidden necklace.

“But I just fixed the fence yesterday. Why do I have to keep fixing everything they break?”

“This isn’t about a fence, Eli. And I shall talk to Harold and the other Men-of-Magic about leaving your workspace alone, and to be more aware of their surroundings. Heaven knows though, about wizards. They are about as untidy as a flock of gulls on a windy day... and always with the pecking at other people’s business for scraps of information.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“I may need you to go into town.”

Eli’s stomach dropped. In town, he was stared at. “You can’t do it?”

“As it is, you might not even have to do it. If the delivery comes in by morning, that is.” She spun back to her desk and grabbed the text she’d left there, rushed back toward him, and pushed her way into the hall.

After a minute, she beckoned for him to follow. As soon as he stepped out of the study, the door shut behind him. Eli twisted around in surprise. When he returned to face his aunt, she was gone.

“Aunt Meg?”

Her form suddenly appeared at the other end of the hall by her bedroom door. “Don’t worry about it, Eli. I’m certain it will come in time. Now off to bed, I’m sure you’ll be very busy tomorrow.”

As it was, the next morning, he did have to go into town. Despite all protestations and excuses, she would not accept a refusal. It started just as soon as Eli was woken by the howl of a train’s horn outside his window, crashing through the tiny, cramped streets of their town, filling his view with stacks of billowing white cloud.

He tripped out of his bedclothes into a stack of books, alerting his aunt down below him who was, for once, cooking breakfast (he could smell it). Since the Men-of-Magic had arrived on their doorstep looking for accommodation two months and four days before, Aunt Meg had not so much as touched a serving ladle. Now she was hollering up toward him to hurry up and get dressed so he could eat before it got cold.

He rushed down the stairs in a melee after dressing, as confused by her words as he was by her suddenness.

When he reached the kitchen, he found that there were still no Men-of-Magic and that his aunt was dressed and setting a plate of egg-on-toast at his place at the dining table. He sat, ogling her apron and spatula, and then craned his head toward the window to look out toward the watermill.

“Not coming,” she said, to answer his supposed thoughts. Though it brought more questions to his mind than it answered.

By that time in the morning, the Men-of-Magic were fighting him for the toaster, turning milk sour as they tried to practice more of their useless magic tricks, or stomping from the mill room to the kitchen and back with mud on their boots. Now they were noticeably as absent as the day before. Maybe more so.

Aunt Meg left him for the main hall as he picked up his toast, leaving the kitchen door swinging long after her frame had gone from his view. He watched the crown birds circling above the gardens through the back window. Although this might have alarmed him once, he could not fathom any reason to stand and rid them from the yard. He stared toward the watermill again. As he suspected, the room was silent and empty. Cloud was forming above it in the stillness of sky once yawning.

He heard his aunt arguing again with this Pumpernell through the door, and so he turned away from staring.

Then he caught the silence.

He pushed away from the table, no longer hungry, and went to let in the moist air from the yard. The crown birds scattered as he pushed the window latch up and shoved the pane forward into the sunlight. Nothing could be heard afterward but the call of the cicadas somewhere outside as the temperature rose. That is, until the sound of something heavy hitting the floor in the hallway—right where his aunt ought to be—hurried to meet his ears.

Eli turned and hurtled her way, shoving at the kitchen door. But it would not budge. Something large was blocking it from the other side. For an acute moment of dread, Eli thought it could be his aunt sprawled on the floor, passed out or worse, the stress having gotten to her at last. But then he heaved again and the door inched forward and he saw that it was not his aunt but a rather oversized, leather-bound book sitting on the floor—lying there, more like, as though it had been thrown down.

He looked up at her heaving frame. And that was how he knew he would have to go into town, although, at the moment, he didn't quite understand how it was all connected.

"Aunt Meg, what's—" he started to say, trying to piece it together.

"Lying scurry-headed nitwits!" she said. "Confounded nettle-sucking liars!"

Whole storms moved over her features. Then she turned on Eli, forcing him to take a step back toward the kitchen. She fished her hand in her pocket. After she'd pulled out the coins—eight silver downings—she pointed down at the book on the floor. "They've sent the wrong one, Eli. Can you believe them? So little time and they want to waste it playing games with me."

"Games?"

She shoved the coins into his hand. "I haven't got the time to run into town myself. So much preparation is needed. I need to be working on that. But you can do this for me. Run into town, find the right book, bring it back here. Don't dawdle—I know that you won't. Do you know where you're going?"

Eli shook his terrified little head.

Oh, but should he? He wondered if she knew what she sounded like right then.

"Past Pear Street, at Hatching and Wey. Beyond the clocktower, next to the train station. You can't miss it. It's called B.F. Phillinger's Emporium of the Esotaires. Look for Mr. Pumpernell. Oh, you'll know him by the smell of his seedy, philandering carcass," she said, as he crossed his eyebrows above his eyes in an irritable line.

He reached out to take the coins and she snatched them back. "Don't go peeking through those other books. There's no time to be wasting, Eli, I mean it. It's not best for you to be out that way for too long."

So his protestations came more in the form of flashing thoughts. He never once could get out how much he detested the idea of going into town on his own to a strange store he'd never heard of with a man in it that had questionable motives, and all for a book. What sort of book could be so important it was imperative his aunt have it right this second?

But he couldn't ask this either. She was simply too terrifying a presence at that moment for him to pry.

Eli nodded instead, staring at the coins, starting to feel a bit of weary of this whole affair (his wit, that inherent knowing he held inside him, told him she knew very well he didn't want to go into town, so this thing he was being sent after must be very important indeed). Then she let him take the downings and he went back through the house to the front room, out the front door, and down the street. Her eyes, he knew, following him the whole way until he was well out of sight.

He skipped off for town, if the skipping were more like plodding with his head down so he didn't catch any of the stares that were surely following him from the windows and doorways of the houses nearby. He wondered as he ignored these stares if any of the people inside them really knew just how strange his life had come to be in the last few weeks. He wondered if they knew taking in wizards and going after strange books could alter what was already an odd existence. He wondered why they thought he was strange when he knew that over half of them were magicians. Maybe not in the same way as the Men-of-Magic, but certainly enough to warrant a few enquiring looks from someone like him, with not a magic hide nor hair.

He turned a corner of the street surveying the town. The road—his road—wound down toward the base of a hill, and then back up again where it met with the older town buildings lined with stalls of fresh produce (his) and street-fare. Thin purple flags sprung up above the buildings and stalls, waving from ominous breezes that bespoke coming storms later in the week. The flags held symbols on them, symbols

of white circles and newts, that welcomed and honored the recent influx of magicians—mostly older wizards—into the town.

The very same wizards that had bombarded his own home and his aunt's free time. Though not in recent days. *Must be some kind of magician holiday*, he thought, shrugging it off, not sure he cared where they were, just as long as it was away from him and Aunt Meg.

Eli continued past the village square and the clocktower, slowing when he reached the wider avenues. He made it to the bookstore Aunt Meg had described after crossing the canal twice and turning left at an old pub, a favorite haunt of hers. It stood in the middle of the lane, right near a way station for the train, just as she'd said. He went in despite the already prevalent stares which grew in size and alarm at his approach to the building.

No one was at the front counter when he entered. He moved through the entry toward a back aisle, glancing at the spines of the books. It was not the sort of bookstore where he would find many books suitable for children, he suspected. If he did not know any better (and he probably did not), he would have said that this was a store for magical texts. That these weren't just any books at all, that these were spell books.

Once he realized this, Eli felt out of place. He felt like he was trespassing on some arcane store of forbidden knowledge. He did not want to be here and yet he felt a sort of curiosity come over him in which neither did he want to leave.

He decided to go around the place in search of the shopkeep, but with each step he took, he felt his sense of purpose shifting more and more toward the books. His fingers traced the spines as he moved down the aisles, his eyes scanning the titles far ahead.

"Hey!" came someone's voice from behind him, "If you're looking to buy, which I highly doubt that you are, then call for some service before rubbing your grubby little fingers along my antique tomes. Otherwise, I suggest you go elsewhere for your giggles!"

Eli backed away, heat blooming at his neck. The shopkeeper stood in front of him flushing an unnatural shade.

"Mr... Pumpernell?"

"What is it?"

"I—I've come here on urgent business," Eli said. "You have my aunt's order."

"Oh, you mean for the Madame?"

"Er... yes?"

"Come along then. I'll be glad to be done with this headache." He waddled over to the front desk where the register stood. As old as some of these books seemed to be, he appeared to be a lot older. He perched a pair of glasses on the end of his nose when he reached the desk and stared at Eli for a minute before saying anything further. "So, you're the nephew then?"

Eli nodded his head, feeling his neck heat up a second time.

"You're the one everyone's been talking about."

"I don't—"

"Hold on a minute," he said. White lines crisscrossed above his head, not there the second before. "Yes, Madame, he's here. I was just about to give it to him. No, no he hasn't. Leave me in peace, woman, what more do you want from me. Yes, yes. Alright, goodbye." He reached down below his register. Eli heard him rifling through what sounded like paper and metal.

"Were you just talking to my aunt?"

“Indeed, I was. She can’t leave me be for more than two seconds. She must have some bee in her bonnet, one the size of a grapefruit, if you ask me.”

“Are you a magician?”

The man hit his head on the way up, muttered something obscene under his breath, and dropped a wrapped parcel onto the counter before Eli. “You really don’t know much of anything, do you? I feel sorry for you kid, that aunt of yours has really been keeping all the what-have-yous to herself and leaving you to the buzzards.”

“What?”

“This it then?” he said, instead of elaborating. He rubbed at the sore spot on his head with a waiting, expectant look on his features. It was hard to tell through all of the wrinkles whether the look also held impatience, but Eli was certain it did.

He looked over the parcel nonetheless. He supposed it was the right order, but how could he know? “Yes,” he decided to say.

“Good, now let this whole parade be at an end. That will be eight downings, if you have them. I do so hope you have them.”

Eli pulled the coins from his pocket and put them on the counter where the man began to hastily count them off. He slid the book forward toward Eli when he was done and so Eli picked it up. It weighed a good six or seven pounds, if Eli could give it a guess. Maybe more.

He turned to go, but then found both a terrible and brilliant idea nestled in his brain. Perhaps a way to solve this mystery once and for all.

“Um, sir,” he said. “Do you know what’s in this book by chance?”

The man’s eyes drew into slits, narrow, green.

“No, I do not. And even if I did, which I’m not saying I do, I wouldn’t be telling you about it now, would I?”

“Can you tell me if it’s for the Men-of-Magic? Why would my aunt need a book like this for herself?”

“It’s no business of mine what that woman gets up to in her spare time—which is likely up to no good at all.”

So much for that. Eli frowned, casting his eyes around at the aisles of books. “But this is a magic bookstore, isn’t it?”

The shopkeeper drew his mouth into a grim line, a look of irritation passing over his features before being swept aside by a look of another kind. Eli found he didn’t like it much.

“Son, I’m going to tell you a story about another boy your age who meddled in the business of his elders when he should have been off poking worms with sticks, or whatever it is boys like to do these days—no matter if his no good aunt sent him on this little ill-fated trip instead of coming here herself.” He gave a half-turn, as though to think over what this might be, then said, “He soon found his end.”

He laughed until he coughed, big wracking coughs.

Eli left the shop without another glance back, met a group of stares outside, and hurried to cross the street with the parcel in his arms. Magic or not, he deserved to know what was going on with his aunt and why so many wizards had suddenly taken an interest in her and her studies. Why he was trekking off to the likes of these places, dealing with the likes of this guy, and altogether sticking his neck out for what seemed now a hapless and disagreeable errand.

At least, that was what Eli thought about it. But he knew by now that old people did not take heed to the thoughts of a nearly twelve-year-old boy. The town was filled with old people like this, not many children at all. And his aunt was old, among the crowd of the no-heeders.

He must have been running faster than he thought, for in another instant he was almost to his home. He was, in fact, about a league down his street when he sensed the air shifting above him, and the temperature falling without warning. He'd heard once that the weather was from a good spell gone wrong—or maybe it had been a bad spell gone right—either way, it was worth a thought. Elsewhere there were *seasons*. So he was not in the least surprised to find this side of the street was different than the sun-covered rest of the town. That in his brief absence from his own house, a thick fog had settled over a part of their neighborhood.

As he neared the fog, however, he realized it was not fog but smoke.

Alarmed, he followed it, letting it carry him through the back gate along the side of the manor where a narrow path wound to the yard. The manor and its yard were large, unlike the rest of the cramped town, but they still pressed up against the canal and the train tracks just beyond it. Eli figured that the smoke was perhaps coming from a stalled train, but when he found himself standing somewhere between the back pathway that led to the kitchen and the watermill, he saw that this was not so.

Smoke filled the room within the watermill. It spilled out through whatever cracks it could find. It polluted the air about and blackened the cloud. It forced Eli to stop dead in his tracks, pressing the book to his chest.

But strangest of all, it gave off a chill that sent his flesh shivering and prickling.

He took a step toward the mill, but then remembered the rule. He wasn't allowed near it no matter what he saw. And anyway, if it were serious, his aunt would be out here.

He turned toward the kitchen when a light flickered within the room, stealing his gaze back. A bright blast of color pooled at the window, flooding the yard in a pale orange and yellow glow before fading.

Eli's heart leapt in his chest.

Another flash.

Some human shape moved within the room, no more to Eli's confused senses than a blurred but robust outline. There came another burst of light. He was forced to cup one hand over his eyes so that he could look on. The figure rushed by the window. Eli heard it crash into something inside. He heard breaking glass. The smoke inside seemed to clear some and he saw a table and stools. Shelves lined with bottles. The shape, standing at the window.

He gasped and stumbled back. But just then the ground began to shake.

Eli fell to his knees and the book dropped to his feet as he stood back up. Blue light arced and danced above his head. An eruption sounded. Glass shattered from the window, spraying the lawn before him. The smoke returned, clogging the room until nothing else could be seen.

Eli coughed. "Do you need help?" he said, through the impressive haze, through another sound, this of a pair of clapping hands.

An explosion came from overhead and Eli jumped back, startled, to find the roof of the mill caving in. Above the hole a stack of brick and wood and stone formed the large and misshapen sides of a structure; the pieces flying in from different, unseen directions. It built at breakneck speed, piling stone about the pillars of wood that made a ring of framework, gathering into one tottering, towering, rectangular shape. Settling under its own weight, just a few feet from the edge of the roof where the

immensely turning waterwheel spun round, collecting water and dumping it back down, stood a chimney where there had not been one before.

The smoke inside the room pushed out through the newly formed shoot, up and out, spewing in a massive plume of hazy, glittering cloud of black and purple. It mingled at once with the rest of the smoke in the sky, spread thin like a layer of butter on toast, and then dispersed with little more sound or sight than a flame blown out by breath.

Eli goggled from the chimney to the room to the figure standing among the wreckage. He could feel his blood tumbling through his body, zooming from the rush of magic all about. He managed to pick up the book. He started to back away, retreating toward the house. But by then something had hissed his name behind him, and he had turned, knowing full well who it was.

Aunt Meg grabbed his arm with a pronged hand and pulled him toward the back door he had already been heading for. Eli managed to throw a last glance back at the mill, even as he tripped over the doorframe, but it was all gone. The chimney, the smoke, the light, the mess—whatever had been there moments before, gone.

And the figure. Gone.

Eli felt his heart drop into his stomach. Had he imagined it then? The magic? The chimney?

With a frown, he turned away from the watermill to face his aunt. They were both standing now in the kitchen. She did not look at him as she turned from the door. Eli got out of her way as she went toward the stove, looking weary and worried.

“Aunt Meg,” he said feebly, waiting for her to realize the reason all of this had happened. The book that sat like lead in his arms.

She chopped vegetables alongside the stovetop, picking at turnips and onions until they were formless lumps upon the counter. Eli sat down, staring at the book in his hands. Staring at the back of his aunt. She didn’t turn. Said, “Oh... oh that’s alright. I don’t need it anymore. You can just go on upstairs and put it my study if you don’t mind.”

Eli frowned a second time. But she’d made such a big deal out of it, gone through all the trouble—he’d gone through all the trouble—getting it here.

“Well, when is lunch going to be ready?” he said, even as he felt his stomach turning.

“Go set the book in my study first. Then I want you to set out some of your favorite books, clothes, and shoes right outside your door. Lunch should be ready by then. I want you to come down and then I’m going to talk to you about some things.”

“You are?”

“Yes.”

Eli, too excited by this last bit of news, went up to do everything she had asked him to even if piling his favorite things outside his room would have likely alerted him once upon a time as being some sort of omen. He didn’t notice.

He rejoined his aunt at the dining table an hour later. Going through and choosing his favorite books had taken him longer than he thought it would and he hadn’t been able to find his favorite shirt. She’d dished out two bowls of turnip stew and sat opposite him, as she waited. Then she waited some more as Eli ate since he’d not had his breakfast earlier. She herself didn’t touch her food. But she did watch him steadily, as he chewed and swallowed and slurped. He felt uncomfortable under such pointed scrutiny, but he had to admit this was the most she had paid him attention all month.

Before he could start in on his round of questions, she spoke. “Eli, you know why I’ve been so... distracted lately.”

That wasn't exactly the word that came to mind. *Distant, reclusive, unhinged, a downright loon, more like*, but he didn't say anything. He let her go on.

"Some things have come up in recent months. You must have realized that my dealings with the Men-of-Magic has been more than a passing hobby. I've required their help with some work and they've done the utmost to provide it."

"Wait, you required *their* help? I thought you were the one helping them—so does that mean you asked them to come stay with us?"

"Not exactly."

Eli tilted his head. "Well, have you finished then, your work—are you done?"

For close to a minute, she did not answer him. Her face had paled. Eli could sense she had not gotten to her point yet. "No, not really," she said. "There's still much to be done... at least I think there might be. But let's not worry about it for today. The wizards are out so let's enjoy our time together. Perhaps we can finally plant that watermelon patch we've always talked about. Do you think this weather will—"

She was interrupted by a tremendous noise above them, a din in the sky overhead that reverberated down into the ground beneath the manor. It was quite possibly the loudest thing Eli had ever heard in all his short eleven years in the Lower Continent, in life altogether. Pans from the kitchen wall behind them scattered onto the floor, causing a greater cacophony of sound that struck Eli's very delicate hearing. The kitchen door came off its hinges. A spray of glass from the window above the sink ricocheted into the yard and beyond onto the pavement. The entire dining set including Eli and his aunt in their chairs slid one way and then the other.

Eli had dropped his bowl as his chair jerked him forward into the table's wooded edge. Whatever had been left in his bowl was now on his clothing, seeping to his skin.

He spluttered and leapt up.

Aunt Meg did not move. Her bowl was still full. It had not, it seemed, even budged an inch. She folded her hands onto the dining table, amid a collection of glass and silverware. She had not lost her patience. She did not look frightened or surprised. But there was something in her look that crackled. And when Eli moved toward the hallway, she turned that ferocious look onto him.

A great whirring had settled in the background. Again, coming from the sky.

"Now, Eli, you wait."

He had begun shaking his head and backing toward the door.

"You just wait, you hear."

He pushed his way into the main hall, her voice following him. He ran. Past the stairway, by the closet, into the front room, toward the door. There came a second crash above them just as his hand clasped the doorknob. It was a good thing he'd gotten a hold of it, as his feet lifted off the floor and he was held airborne for but a second. The sound was not as loud as the first, so there was less disturbance. And when he came back down, he threw the door open.

He came down the path into the front yard, shielding his eyes against the glare. Something large and reflective was up there in the sky, nearly blinding him but just low enough for him to make out as his vision cleared.

When his eyes had adjusted, he could see that other people in the neighborhood were pouring out into their yards as well, all frightened, all staring up at one thing, up in the sky. Two airships, so large they blocked the sun almost from view.

There were gasps of terror and awe all at once. There were shouts, running feet, and flinging arms. People warning others to stay indoors. Doors slamming shut and locking. Above all there were voices that rose with the pitch of those whirring turbines.

“This far west.”

“But why here of all places?”

“Great Mystery, those are Scarecrows!”

“They can’t be Scarecrows.”

“Well they’re not Crown ships.”

These were not the same old men that flaunted their haggard, dried-up magic tricks all about the city. These were not Men-of-Magic at all. These were real magicians, people with real power, with spells and powders and potions, and the ability to bring whole ships alive. And here of all places they had come, with ships bigger than any Windbreaker here or anywhere else. Ships bigger than anything Eli had seen.

The airships bobbed in the tepid air. They floated, somehow anchored in their places, their waywins billowing in ochre waves. The ships stretched their long skeletal wings in and out, flexing their clawed ends.

Eli was among a small collection of people still gathered outside. They all watched on above them. Eli could make out people on the multi-decks, moving to and fro. When they raised their mainsail, unfurling the fabric in a soft whoosh that reached so far down Eli wasn’t the only one who could hear it, the remaining people in the neighborhood hurried inside in a frenzy. But Eli stayed. The waywin had revealed a symbol etched in gold on the fabric. The symbol of a spiral sun. He stared. His breath came up short when a hand pressed into his shoulder.

Aunt Meg pulled him inside. Her clothing had gone askew, as though she’d just run from somewhere. She struggled to get him past the threshold so she could close the door. Once she’d locked them both in, she released him.

He made a go for the front room, but her words caught him first. “Now you wait, Eli, this isn’t—”

“Do you know what’s going on?” he said, feeling feverish and light-headed. Was his necklace acting up again? Surely this much excitement would cause anyone to feel this way. “You do! You know exactly what’s happening! All the secret business—all those conversations with the magic men! I bet you’re not even surprised right now!”

She didn’t respond. This seemed to flare up his anger even more. So many weeks and it was finally coming out.

“Is this what you and the Men-of-Magic have been preparing for? Did you invite them too?” He jabbed his finger toward the ceiling.

Aunt Meg sighed. “No, I didn’t invite them. I didn’t invite any of them.”

“But you said you needed their help. The Men-of-Magic.”

“Yes, but only once they were already here and I saw I could use it.”

“So why are these other magicians here?”

“Eli.” She said only this, not having to add that these were questions that required long, deep answers. That these were questions that might have, in fact, no answers at all.

“But you must have some idea,” he said, pushing on. “I mean, you’ve been wrapped up in all of their business long enough, don’t you think? Don’t you think you have some idea?”

She reached her hand out to touch his shoulder. “Eli, we need to—”

He pulled away from her. But it wasn’t his fault. She’d been pulling away from him for far longer. “Then tell me what that sound was earlier. When the ships came.” He slid his eyes above him, listening

again to the whirring. “Why did the house shake so badly—was it their magic? Aunt Meg, why do you look so pale? Can’t you tell me what you know about them?”

She wouldn’t open her mouth to answer. She wouldn’t even gesture.

“Aunt Meg...”

Her eyes darted to his chest as though she were, once again, thinking about his necklace. She had been asking him an awful lot to take it off lately. She’d been cleaning it for days at a time. He couldn’t fathom having to remove it now, with so much going on. He needed it. His usual strength was ebbing, though he looked far better than she did right then. In fact, the thought of her taking it again so soon after the last time scared him so much that he wrapped his hand around it through his shirt. He looked down, not noticing that, as he did, Aunt Meg had vanished from the room.

When he realized this, he went searching in the kitchen. He found her inside making, of all things, a sandwich.

“Just answer me this,” he began, but stopped. She’d rounded on him, or rather, on the table behind him. She found what she was looking for, a soft knife for spreading mustard, and returned to the counter where her ingredients sat in a hodge-podge.

“That symbol—what was that?”

He thought that she’d continue to ignore him—why break her streak now—but then her voice came, turning the corner that was her sturdy frame, and landing against Eli’s eardrums sounding about a hundred years old. “It was a Firebrand’s firebrand—a Sorcerer’s Scorch. One of many.”

Eli felt his heart flutter in his chest. “But what are magicians like those doing in this part of the country? They’re not like the Men-of-Magic, are they?”

“Not magicians, Eli,” she said, “sorcerers. And no, they’re not like the Men-of-Magic. Not in the least.”

He shifted on his feet, unsure what the difference was. “But what are they doing *here*?”

She turned toward him with her finished sandwich in hand, looking troubled for an instant. Whatever she might have been able to tell him about magicians or magic or the airships, about her place in all of it, she kept to herself.

“I don’t know.”

She wrapped up the sandwich and returned to the main hall, the door blocking her from view as it closed. Eli followed. He didn’t see her right away. He swiveled around, searching for her, checking the stairwell. He didn’t see her until his gaze turned back toward the front of the hall, close to the front door. She was suddenly standing there next to the broom closet. A traveling bag beside her.

The rolling sort.

“What’s that for?” he said, stopping some distance from her, brows knitting together.

“You, of course,” she said.

He gave her a frown. “But where am I going? Are... are you coming with me?”

His voice sounded strange to his ears. Something prickly and hot bit at his eyes.

“I’m not coming with you, no. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m too sick, Eli. I need to stay here.”

“Well why do I even have to go? Why can’t I stay here with you, like I always do?”

She leaned her body against the wall. It was not his imagination. She did not look well at all. “Don’t make this difficult, Eli. I can’t come... I can’t come because I’m dying. And so I have to send you back to them.”

Eli took a wide step back, feeling knocked in the stomach. Feeling off balance. As his head settled, he said, unblinking, “W-Who?”

The word was a breath on his lips.

“Your parents.”

His parents. His. There were such things.

He bore his eyes into her waxy features, staring but unstarving. Questions cutting at him, stabbing until he could hardly breathe. Whirring in the distance, but no longer from the airships. Buzzing in his head now. Loud.

“I know... I know what you’re thinking. But they are not dead. I’m sorry for letting you think that all these years, but it was—was the easiest course of action.” She winced between her words. Rings had formed around her eyelids. Was it just him, or was she losing tone as they spoke? “You will be much happier with them. Unlike with this old bag of bones, you can be a kid.”

He could not have said then what he was feeling, but it was not excitement. Not any kind of happiness at all.

“Eli, can you hear me?”

He nodded.

“Good. I have to send you back to them, today, right now. But before I do, I want you to promise me one thing before you go,” she said. “Take it easy on them. They never wanted things to be like this either. They... they made the choice out of necessity, not desire. They’ve always loved you.”

The words held little meaning to a boy who had grown up without parents and was expected, of a sudden, to be grateful for it. But he nodded his head. And she nodded hers back in satisfaction. “Alright then...”

She came forward despite her wavering gait, her flagging energy, and wrapped him in her arms. Her arms were weak, mere bones beneath all that flesh, but her grip was strong. She guided him toward the closet and there leaned down and spoke into his ear. “You must know by now that I am no ordinary old woman.” She laughed. It was a sound that made Eli feel good inside, like finding an old memory he didn’t know he still had. “I am the greatest witch this side of the Summer Fields!” She shoved him backward into the closet where he tripped over a dusty handbag and fell flat on his hindquarters. Before he could say anything more, Aunt Meg stuffed the suitcase in with him and slammed the door.

The floor lurched. His head spun as he felt his body tilted to one side and then the other. He didn’t know which way was up and which was down. He thought he would be sick. He craned his head forward and jammed it between his knees. Bile rose in his throat.

And then there was a rapid halt.

Everything returned to center, but the recent news still circled in his head, making his ears ring once again. He could focus on one thing and one thing alone, a revelation that eclipsed all other thoughts. Somewhere, somehow, his parents were alive. And he was going back to live with them.