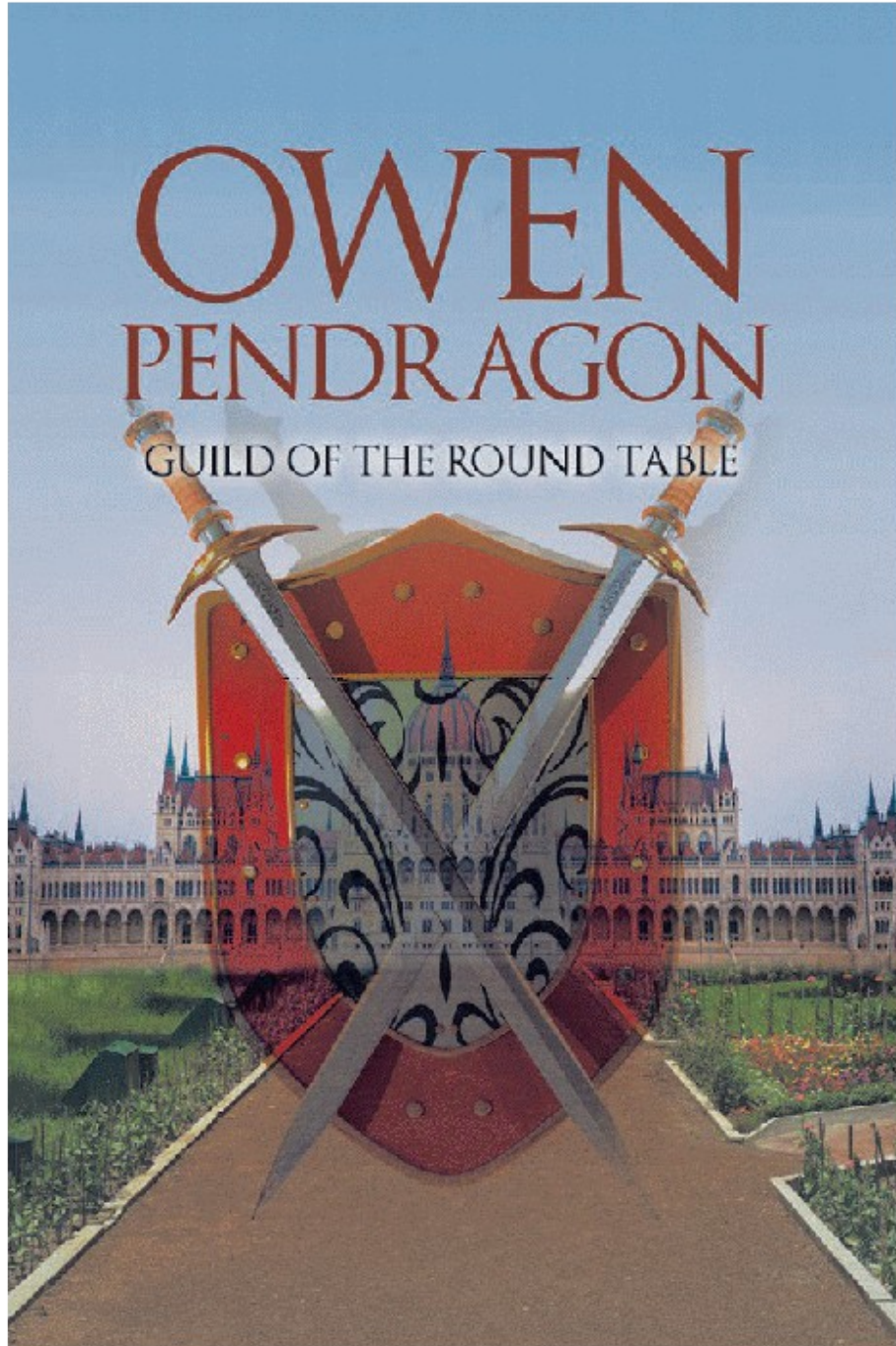


OWEN PENDRAGON

GUILD OF THE ROUND TABLE



Owen Pendragon

Guild of the Round Table

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Dedicated to my late father, for his support and
encouragement while writing this book.

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Raids

Twelve-year-old Owen was enjoying an unexpected lie-in when he became aware of a hand gently patting his face.

“Time to get up, lazy bones.”

There were more taps to his face before he turned over with one eye open to see a beaming Cheshire cat smile from his sister, Rose.

“Go away,” he grunted, snapping his eye shut.

Rose huffed before patting his face again. “But it’s time to get up,” she replied with a hint of frustration, “the sun has got his hat on.”

“Okay, okay,” growled Owen as he opened both eyes this time. “I’m awake!”

Rose grinned and pirouetted before stomping out of his room. Owen grumbled, “Lazy bones.” He leaned over and pulled back the curtains to reveal a sky full of dark grey clouds. “The sun has got his hat on?! Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it.”

He picked up his phone and saw it was quarter to eight. “What!” He bolted from his bed, missed his footing and ended up in a heap. After picking himself up from the floor he rushed to the bathroom, crashing into a wall or two on the way, had a shower and was back in his room in record time. He donned his school uniform, grabbed the books he needed for the day’s lessons and stumbled his way downstairs and into the kitchen.

“Morning, love,” his mum said as he reached for the bread and placed two slices in the toaster.

“I’m late.”

His mum smiled. “No, they’ve closed the schools, something about the army taking it over as a base.”

“What?”

“It’s all over the news,” she replied.

Rose was now eating a bowl of Rice Krispies. Owen shot her a few daggered looks.

“You should take a look,” his mum added as his toast popped up.

Getting the Flora from the fridge, he finished spreading his toast when his mother’s hand reached over and snatched a piece.

“Mum!” he complained before retrieving another slice for the toaster.

“Oh, come now, you love your mum,” she replied, giving him a big kiss.

“Yucky,” he complained, wiping his cheek.

Rose spluttered half-chewed Rice Krispies across the table.

“Owen got a big Mummy kiss.”

Owen snarled, “I could still be in bed.” “She didn’t wake you up?” asked his mum.

“Oh no,” he replied sarcastically. “Time to wake up, lazy bones,” he added while patting her cheek in dramatic fashion.

His mum laughed.

“Wakey Brother Monster,” he said to Rose as he spread his replacement piece of toast.

She just raised an eyebrow and gave him a sneaky smile. Mum laughed again.

“Well, good, no school,” he said with a smile.

“You should take a look at the news,” his mum told him again. “I will as soon as I’ve got Rose for waking me up.”

“Oh no!” Rose laughed as she jumped down from her chair and shot off with Owen chasing her pretending to be a monster.

Mum just smiled as they left the room. She caught up with them in the lounge. “Hey, you two, calm down, you’ll wake your father.”

“Too late for that,” said their dad entering the room. “I was woken by a big clumsy thundering elephant earlier.”

Owen knew he was referring to him. “Sorry,” he said. “Um, school?” he asked.

“Closed, love, the army’s taken over the high school and they’ve closed the others in case,” his mum replied.

“In case of what?” he asked while sitting in his chair.

“As I’ve told Owen, it’s all over the news.” Mum left the room. “Right,” he replied finding the remote.

Rose plodded over and popped herself on his knee for a hug. "Morning, princess."

"She's not a princess; she's a Wakey Brother Monster." "Not! Daddy says I'm a princess," Rose countered. "Wakey Brother Monster."

Her dad whispered something in her ear.

"Clumsy thundering elephant." Rose giggled.

"What did you call me, you Wakey Brother Monster?"

Rose jumped off her dad's knee and walked over to Owen. "You are a clumsy thundering elephant," she said wagging her finger at him.

"Come here," he told her as he snatched her and began the tickling again. A minute later Mum was back with a mug of tea. "Promised Bronwen I'd pop some apples over. I'll see you soon," she told Dad. "Are you ready, pudding," she asked Rose.

"Yep," came the reply.

"Apples for apple pies," Owen told Rose.

"With custard," she added before the pair began smacking their lips and rubbing their tummies.

"You two are crazy," Mum told them.

"Not," replied Rose. "That's Meg and Lottie."

"She's not wrong there," Dad said chuckling.

Their twin cousins Megan and Charlotte were known for their stupid practical jokes, amongst other things, earning themselves the honour of being called 'The Crazies'.

The last time it was for filling a boy's school bag with stones, which he carted up the hill to his house giving himself an asthma attack in the process. Aunt Bronnie, as she was known to Owen and Rose, gave them earache about filling the poor lad's bag with boulders much to the girls' fervent protest about it being just a few small pebbles.

When it came to his neighbours, Mr and Mrs Willcocks, he and his friend John would get the blame as it could never be the fault of 'those lovely girls'.

Their dad found a news channel reporting on the goings-on in town and decided to listen to what the reporter was saying.

"These are the scenes in the town of Llangollen this morning as soldiers took control of the hillock, Dinas Bran, behind me. As you can

see from these images, a large tarpaulin has been erected over a sizeable area of the hillside. It was last night when a local earth tremor occurred that the Royal Welsh Guards moved in to secure this site...”

“That’s some area!” said dad.

“Like a whole side of the hill,” Owen replied. “Never gave a thought about that shaking last night.”

“A lot of parents probably did with the goings-on in Cornwall.”

Owen thought back ten days to the first incident in the Cornish town of Camelford and the reports of five children going missing; they were last seen on CCTV cameras joking around while buying goodies in the local shops. The next day eleven children vanished in Bude.

Each disappearance began with a localised earth tremor and after searching the area, a large gouge was found in a nearby field accompanied by huge boot prints. Even the setting up of a Quick Response Unit made up of police, scientists and the army didn’t stop the disappearance of more children.

It wasn’t until the fourth day that the culprits were spotted. A local man filmed giant creatures with large clubs snatching up another eighteen from Padstow. On the fifth day, a raid in Wadebridge met with the first resistance as locals and those driving through the town blocked and threw whatever was to hand at the monsters. It worked as no children were reported missing, but the main road was a mangled mess of cars and lorries.

The terrifying images shown on news reports around the world led to an influx of people wanting to get in on the action.

However, the next two days were raid free, giving hope that resistance was the key to beating these invaders. Those hopes were dashed on days eight and nine when eight children were taken from Stratton and Holsworthy.

Nevertheless, last night there were no raids or reports of missing children, just the armies moving into the North Wales town of Llangollen.

The news reporter snapped Owen out of his meandering thoughts.

“Are we seeing a pre-emptive move to where the raids are about to happen? Why did the armed forces move in before the tremor, and has there been a way to predict where a raid will take place? These and lots of other questions are being asked now as we go into the eleventh day since the terrifying raids began.”

“Tanya, have there been any reports of raiders there?” asked the newsreader in the studio.

“Bill, there have been no reports or sightings here in Wales, but we can only speculate on what happened until more information is provided. As you can imagine, all sorts of ideas and suggestions are being bandied about – but, as yet, nothing concrete.”

“Thank you, Tanya. In other news...”

“In other words, they have no idea what’s going on.” Owen shook his head.

“Well, if it was a raid, it was a failure,” his dad replied.

Owen’s mobile buzzed. He opened a text from John that just read, *Aliens*.

“John? Aliens?” asked his dad.

Owen laughed. “Is he that predictable?”

“Right up his street, this lot. I’m surprised that phone of yours hasn’t been ringing non-stop considering what’s going on.”

“No ambulances, police cars though. Bryn’s phone, on the other hand, will be ringing like crazy, even if he’s on holiday in Spain.” Owen and some of his friends’ parents were in the emergency services. Bryn’s mum and dad were in the police force, and John’s and Owen’s dads were in the ambulance service. They quite often got calls if a lot of police and ambulances were around to see what was going on, which was stupid really as they knew nothing either.

On the TV, Tanya was repeating herself about the situation in Llangollen when the newsreader interrupted her. It wouldn’t have caught the attention of Owen and his dad under normal circumstances, but this would have attracted anyone’s attention.

“Tanya, Tanya, I have to cut you short as we’re receiving a report of a raid taking place in Cornwall.”

The reporter’s shocked and surprised face was replaced by the newsreader’s. “We are receiving reports of a raid in the village of Tintagel. We will now cross over to our local correspondent, Peter Robinson, who is making his way to the scene.”

The picture changed again to show Peter walking down a country lane with reporters from other stations. The sound, what Owen thought must be gunfire, could be heard in the background.

A squad of soldiers ran by and the news crews made a passage for them to get through, then a number of empty coaches crept their way along the cramped lane.

It was the reaction of the reporter as he reached the corner and looked around to see what was happening that piqued Owen's interest. He fell silent; his face went as white as a sheet. It wasn't until the cameraman caught up a few seconds later and focused on what had silenced the professional reporter that Owen could understand his reaction. He would have most likely responded the same.

"Good grief," said his dad.

The camera caught it all. Soldiers, locals and no doubt others that had come in to help were in a ferocious battle with the invaders – the same ones that were filmed in Padstow.

"Look at them!" Owen said engrossed in the scene.

There were two types of what could only be described as monsters running riot across the fields behind a few cottages.

As the reporter and his cameraman got closer, their distinctiveness could be seen more clearly in daylight than in the previous night-time shots. The first were about nine feet tall with broad shoulders and extremely muscular. The faces had a human shape with hair, the eyes menacingly dark, they had a wide flattened nose and a mouth full of sharp teeth when they snarled.

The most frightening thing was the huge wooden clubs they wielded, like something you would see in a picture of a primitive man, only bigger.

Nobody got in their way as they swung those things around, especially the second monsters' clubs that had large metal spikes in them. These monsters were taller than the first, standing at over twelve feet and ferocious with it. These giant creatures had a similar muscular build and faces, but no hair. There were large bony ridges, like armour plating that looked like a form of protection, over the top of their heads and across their shoulders.

Yet, even though one swipe from the club would certainly kill you, they were being gentle; well, as gentle as a giant club-swinging monster could be, which was surprising. They even looked like they were having fun.

The camera focused on an elderly woman who was bashing one of the smaller monsters with a rolling pin, who in turn was laughing at her feeble attempts to scare him away.

“One blow from that huge club would surely crush her,” the reporter babbled.

Two more monsters approached, and the lady could be seen saying something as she twirled the kitchen tool around over her head.

“They didn’t like that.” Peter watched the two newcomers close in menacingly.

“What?” The reporter’s astonishment echoed in Owen’s head as they picked her up, placed her on the roof of a garden shed and started laughing.

“What’s going on here?” the reporter asked. “We should be running for our lives, yet the monsters are enjoying themselves. Our attempts to drive them back, a waste of time as the soldier’s weapons seem useless. Bullets and rocket-propelled explosives just seem to bounce off them as though they have an invisible force field.”

As if to prove the point, a helicopter appeared firing a missile at a small group of advancing larger monsters who disappeared in a plume of dust, fire and smoke. When the dust settled, the missile had only blown a hole in the ground knocking the monsters off their feet.

That’s about the time it appeared. Quickly coming into view was a sight that caught the attention of the reporter.

“Frightening and fascinating,” said the reporter as the camera panned on to a new part of the raid – a massive swirling cloud vortex that seemed to move by itself. The grey colour joined by the occasional splash of reds, blues and other colours spun gracefully to a stop before settling into the ground, causing a hollow in the field.

“Now we know how the gouges were made,” Owen absently mumbled. “Um...” Something caught his eye. He looked closer at the hypnotic vortex. “That’s *how it moves*.”

“What have you seen, Son?” his dad quizzed.

Owen pointed out two more creatures. Tall, thin beings holding sceptres with a glowing crystal atop. They were so well camouflaged it was a miracle he spotted them.

“How did you notice them?” asked his dad.

“They don’t call me Sherlock for nothing, you know,” he replied. Dad chuckled at the nickname his son had been given – a reference to his ability to see things others missed.

A tractor appeared. The driver tried to push back a giant but was immediately swamped. The tractor turned upside down and was pounded to pieces. Wheels flew off like Frisbees while the driver was helped to safety by a group of nearby soldiers.

Things then turned up a notch when the monsters seemed to organise themselves. It became clear what their target was: the primary school.

Parents, soldiers and the others had quietly set up a ring of defence around the building in the hope they could evacuate the children on the coaches seen travelling through earlier. They hadn't been able to yet. People had blocked the lane with cars and other vehicles, which needed to be cleared before the children could be taken to safety. Time was running out; the monsters were closing in.

Two coaches pulled up ready for the first of the children and a third waited for a clear spot when suddenly the vortex turned black and seemed to come alive.

The cameraman swung his lens towards the swirling cloud as it disgorged another type of creature. This one was probably the scariest yet; positively Gothic and wouldn't look out of place on a church or 19th-century building.

The reporter said what most were thinking, gargoyles, as one swept over his head causing him to instinctively duck. The black flying creatures had bat-like wings, four legs with nasty looking claws and a terrifying face with dark eyes. They also had long fangs, two holes for a nose and ears pointed at the top and bottom. They broke up the lines of defence around the school by lifting people into the air and casting them aside like rags.

A number of gargoyles broke off from the main group, having seen the children being loaded onto the coaches, then attacked. The children screamed and ran back into the school for protection while the monsters tore the buses to pieces.

The brave teachers and bus drivers did their best in driving the beasts back. One teacher was lifted up and propelled aside, then landed heavily on a greenhouse in a neighbouring garden.

A driver was sent crashing into the cars in the school's car park, which left a gap allowing the flying monsters access to the children. The gargoyles swooped snatching five small children before anyone could react and swiftly carried them off into the vortex.

The reporter's frantic voice echoed the terror of the screaming little ones as they were carried away.

Owen and his dad were unable to tear their eyes from the horror being played out on the TV screen.

Everybody including the reporters and their crews had now joined the defensive lines trying to keep the school protected as monsters charged at them and snatched people off into the air before flinging them aside.

The soldiers were now lashing out using their weapons like clubs. The bullets they fired were having little effect. It wasn't long before the giant monsters broke through and were now entering the school from every side, passing the children off to the flying monsters who carried them through the vortex.

There was nothing to stop them; the screaming children were taken away one by one.

One of the teachers could be seen shielding the children and fighting back but was knocked aside and also carried off into the vortex.

It all happened so fast. As the last child was taken, the monsters hastily retreated through the swirling cloud and vanished.

Owen and his dad sat in silence for a moment trying to make sense of what they had just witnessed.

The TV screen showed images of sobbing parents being comforted by others. Soldiers and local villagers sat on the ground with their heads bowed as well as the reporter. Others were clearly angry as they stomped around kicking and throwing things in frustration.

Ambulance crews, army medical teams and anyone with first-aid training were tending to the injured as best they could. A line of ambulances appeared to take the wounded away.

Owen broke the silence. "How many was that?" "Who knows?"

"How do you get the screams of those kids out of your head?" asked Owen.

"That, Son, is something you'll have to live with. There's no magic to take it away," he replied.

His mum came in followed by Rose. Owen's first thought was to turn off the TV, but she said that Rose had probably taken it better than everyone else, including the twins.

The reporter brought their attention back to the screen.

“We understand,” he said, trying to regain his composure, “that there were ninety-six children in attendance this morning out of the hundred and three registered at the school. The death toll is currently three – two soldiers and the head teacher of the school. Ambulances continue to take the injured away, some of which are said to be in a serious condition, even life threatening. Those creatures could have easily inflicted more fatalities.”

Rose popped herself on the settee next to Owen. “Will you read this for me,” she asked placing a book in his hands.

“Yep,” he said hoping it would help remove the screams echoing around his head.

His dad turned off the TV and followed his mum into the kitchen to talk.

It wasn’t long before there was a knock at the door. Owen could hear his dad talking to the visitors but couldn’t make out what they were saying. He looked through the window and saw a couple of soldiers.

“Soldiers,” he told

Rose. “Read,” she

replied. “But—”

“Read.” She waved the book at him. “It’s soldiers!”

Rose just scowled and shoved the book back into his hands.

#

It was the evening of day two when a secret group met in the town of Bodmin, a group set up in the sixth century waiting for just this moment. The twelve members came from all over Britain. Emily, the eleven-year-old daughter of the chairperson, was looking forward to going over to a friend’s house, which was usual when these meetings took place, but had been told she was needed at home this time. This didn’t go down well.

“Mum,” she complained, “why would I want to join in your boring gatherings?”

“It’s time you got to know what all this is about,” her mum replied. It wasn’t that she didn’t know the other members of the group, but a meeting of people ranging from twenty to sixty years old, who for all she

knew got together for a cuppa and clotted cream scones, wasn't her scene. Her reluctance was clearly visible in the way she helped to organise the lounge in preparation for the gathering.

"I think you'll be surprised with what you're getting involved in," her mum told her.

Emily scoffed at the idea.

"You're not going looking like that, are you?"

Emily was dressed all in black with heavy make-up and a black wig; more like a Goth than a well-presented young lady.

"What's wrong with this?" "Well..."

"I like it!"

The knock at the door thankfully interrupted their disagreement. Emily answered it and welcomed in the oldest visitor attending the meeting.

"Hello, Uncle Will," she said, using 'uncle' more as a term of respect rather than because he was her real uncle.

"Hello, sweet pea," he replied using his pet name for her. "Can you help me with some things from my car?"

Emily followed him outside and carried a mysterious briefcase into the house as more members arrived. She saw her Aunt Gwen who came over and gave her a giant hug.

"Lovely to see you, poppet." She beamed a giant smile. "You're joining us tonight, then?"

Gwen chuckled when Emily pulled an 'I wish I wasn't' face. Amy, the youngest, arrived. "Hi, kiddo," she said.

Paul who reported on a raid in Bude arrived next.

Emily was curious, wanting to know if any children were taken like the night before. She skulked off to the living room and switched on a news channel to get the latest information. Amy had the same idea and followed her. They both listened to the reporter discuss the recent terrifying events.

"Weird," Emily mumbled to herself.

"Ready?" her mum asked from the door.

They joined the others in the lounge and her mum called the meeting to order. After a few brief words about the purpose of the meeting, the discussion was opened up to the group.

"I have to ask, are we sure these incidents are what we're looking for?" asked Henry.

"I might've asked that myself if everything this evening hadn't happened," countered Paul.

"Looks like the number of children taken might hit double figures," Amy added, repeating what she'd heard on the TV.

The questions running through Emily's mind revolved around why these missing children were so important and why were they looking for these happenings. She was about to ask the question when Uncle Will retrieved a very old-looking book from his mysterious briefcase.

He started to read a passage from the book, "Those days a report of five and eleven will be heard taken by a foe that will not be found. With that, the progeny of times concealed will be called forth to answer the challenge and embark on a quest to save and protect the lands of Albion. They will first be joined by two, the daring one's and a young keeper of the record – the daughter of the leader of those entrusted with the secrets. Fearless in action, they will release the tortured ones. Albion will weep and rejoice in that time; in sadness and dance they will live." He paused to let the words sink in.

"Uh?!" Emily screwed her face in confusion.

"Do we have a total of those taken tonight?" asked Rita.

"Not yet," Amy told the gathering. "It may be worth checking," she added.

"Is someone going to explain that reading?" asked Emily.

"Let's find out the latest on the raid before we jump to any conclusions," said Paul.

"Someone!" pleaded Emily.

Uncle Will looked at her and raised a finger to indicate that all will be answered.

It wasn't long before Emily's mum and Paul returned to the group. "The official total is eleven," reported her mum.

Emily felt the blood drain from her face. 'Five and eleven' she recalled from Uncle Will's reading, she then remembered the line 'daughter of the leader of those entrusted with the secrets'. *Was this the group entrusted with the secrets?* she wondered. She suddenly became weak. *The daughter of the leader. Am I that daughter?* Her stomach turned over in fear. *Then who are the others?*

“We have to prepare the government for their arrival, then,” her mum was saying when she started to listen in again.

“That would be Robert and myself,” said Rita. “How soon?” asked Henry.

“I’ll try to get a meeting with the PM as soon as possible,” said Robert. “It may be handy if we could get you in with us, William. The records might come in handy.”

Emily was trying to take it all in, but her head was spinning with everything she had already heard. The implications were enormous – if not mind-boggling.

This meeting had been anything but boring.

We Are Who?

Owen didn't have time to read for long before the soldiers took them to their headquarters. The family was now in the back of a truck and out of the sight of prying eyes. Owen wondered what this was all about. One thing was certain, this could'nt be a prank played by his cousins because they were still grounded after the 'boulders' escapade.

"This is your school," Rose told Owen as she clung to her favourite soft toy, Flopsy the rabbit.

"Yep," replied Owen.

Their parents were told to follow General Peters who Owen recognised from the reports he'd seen earlier. He was asked to take Rose to the hall and wait awhile, which was easier said than done because she was asking a million questions about the unfamiliar surroundings.

They entered the hall where Owen saw his long-time friend Mary. "Mizzy?" he said, puzzled.

Only Owen called her Mizzy, as that's what he called her from nursery school, others called her Smiley.

"Owey," she replied.

Rose smiled. "It's Mary."

There was a strange girl sat with Mary dressed in as much Goth garb as seemed possible.

Owen pulled up a chair while Rose plodded over to Mary and gave her a giant hug.

"Hi, I'm Owen," he told the strange girl.

"I'm Emily," she replied. "Most people call me Emms."

"Do you have any idea what all this is about?" Owen asked.

"Sorry. I'm not allowed to say just yet," came the reply.

The past week she'd learnt about her heritage – what she called 'The best kept secret the world had never known'. She was told to stay at home with her house under armed guard; her mobile phone confiscated and contact with the outside world non-existent.

Mary chuckled when Owen gave her one of his Sherlock gazes.

Mary wasn't known for being outspoken and found interaction with anyone new difficult; however, Owen cared deeply for her, which was evident ten months ago when her family were involved in a horrendous car accident that killed both her parents. Mary was treated by his dad and John's at the crash site. Motorbike riders were blamed, which didn't quite add up in Owen's mind, but he couldn't glean any other details from either parent. He spent almost every spare minute with her at the hospital, especially when she was comatose; he almost pleaded with her to wake up. Owen was there, although he'd fallen asleep in a chair next to her bed, when she eventually did. Her recovery and rehabilitation was credited to her determination and her close friends' constant encouragement. She now lives with her Aunt Rowena.

Owen noticed she was not her usual self. "Are you okay?" he asked. She sighed and made a face that told Owen she wasn't. Tears started to well up in her eyes. She was saved by the arrival of another group. "Never again," John's voice boomed.

"John, you know we love you," came a reply in stereo.

"Oh boy," mumbled Owen, which caught Emily's attention.

"I will never travel in the same vehicle at the same time as you ever again. You are a nightmare to society," continued John.

The twins flanked him linking an arm each. "Get off, get off," he complained.

"A new face," Meg finally said noticing Emily. "So there is," Lottie added.

John's wish for them to let go was granted, but not before Meg placed a sneaky peck on his cheek and ruffled the back of his hair.

"Argh, yuck, anyone got any anti-bacterial wipes, anything, disinfectant will do and don't mess with the hair!" He wiped the offending kiss away.

Rose laughed at his outburst.

"What you laughin' at?" he said pointing at Rose. She just pointed back at him.

“Monkey,” John said.

“No, she’s a Wakey Brother Monster.” “Not! Princess!”

Claire and her brother, Meredith, walked in.

“Wakey Brother Monster,” Owen continued.

“Daddy said I’m a princess and you’re a clumsy thundering elephant,” she replied, making everyone laugh.

“Hi,” said Claire.

There was a round of acknowledgements. She sat down and was introduced to Emily.

Meredith removed two plastic dinosaurs from his pocket and started to play.

“Anyone know why we’re here?” asked Claire. “Not a clue,” replied Owen.

“Well, at least you look a bit better,” Claire said to Mary. “A bit,” she replied.

“Why, are you ill?” John asked.

“Claire,” Mary whispered, her face blushing.

“That report on TV this morning had her throwing up,” Claire told the group. “The spirally thing did it. Looked like she’d seen a ghost.”

Mary shot her a look.

“Anyone got any choccy,” asked Lottie.

“You might lose a few pounds if you give up the chocolate,” replied John.

“I’ve told you before,” Lottie replied, “I’m not fat – just a little plump, that’s all.” She breathed in and tried to flatten her belly.

Emily cracked up laughing. “Must remember that line,” she said.

Owen didn’t notice the conversation. He was fitting together a few events from the morning: his dad’s face at seeing the vortex and Mary’s reaction to it. He suspected the reason was something to do with the accident.

He pondered things for a moment before finally asking Mary a question. “Now I’m pretty sure it wasn’t motor bikes, was it?” he whispered to her. “It has something to do with that vortex. You’ve seen it before, haven’t you?”

If he wasn't sure before asking her, he was now seeing the horror in her face.

"You're not allowed to say, are you?" he added.

"What you two whispering about?" asked Megan.

"Nothing you need to worry yourself about," Owen replied. "Sweet nothings," Lottie added.

"Here we go," John moaned.

"You do know he loves—" Meg began.

"Katherine Jenkins," the twins chimed together. "The singer?" enquired Emily.

Both girls chimed, "He says she's stunning, beautiful, pretty and drop-dead gorgeous."

Owen painted a sarcastic smile across his face. "Want to meet her, do we?" Meg asked.

"As long as there's no singing," Owen said playing along before mouthing, "Nightmare," to Mary.

"Yeah, sends shivers down your spine," John added. "You pair of ignoramuses," Lottie blurted.

"Ignoramuses, are we?" John replied.

"At least we're not a pair of pains in the rumpalumpus," Owen added. "Ha, ha," said Megan sarcastically.

"There's nothing wrong with my rumpalumpus," commented Charlotte standing and smoothing the creases in her trousers, which had Emily laughing again.

It wasn't long before the subject of why they were gathered came up and speculation was rife, especially with the raid.

John was in full swing with alien invasions and conspiracy theories when a soldier told them there was another raid taking place at Camelford High School.

"I need to see the general," said Owen. "Something I spotted earlier." The general appeared. "What is it, son?"

Owen explained the camouflaged beings in the vortex and a theory he had come up with about shooting the flickering lights on top of the sceptres.

"There!" Owen pointed at the computer screen.

"Well, I never," mumbled the general. "Nicely spotted."

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“How many children are in the school?” asked Claire.

“None, all were sent home after the earlier raid,” the general replied.

“I’ll get a report about those creatures sent to HQ. Definitely worth a mention.”

Owen’s and John’s dads appeared.

“Can we go home now?” Rose asked.

“Sorry, princess, there’s more,” he replied. Rose huffed.

“We need you to come with us and all will be revealed,” John’s dad told the youngsters.

“And a humdinger it is,” Owen’s dad added.

Some of the group gave Emily confused glances but said nothing. They followed the adults to one of the classrooms where seats were laid out in a semi-circle facing a row of six chairs. They found their parents and sat waiting for what was to come next.

“Owen has worked it out,” Mary whispered to her aunt.

“Too clever for his own good, that man of yours,” she replied. “Hey, he’s not my man,” Mary feebly objected.

“You could’ve fooled me.” Aunt Rowena smiled at her red-faced ward.

#

A couple of minutes passed before anything happened. Then two men and a woman came in and introduced themselves as Ambassador Christopher Talbot, William Rosset and Maurine Jackson.

“Ambassador?” John whispered to Owen. “Shush,” Owen replied.

“Sorry you’ve had to wait. I expect you have many questions, and we will answer them the best we can. I can say this, we have explained everything we know so far to your parents. Miss Emily?”

“I’ve not said a thing,” she told Talbot.

“Ah, right, good. This is new to Miss Emily, although she does know what this is about.”

Emily cringed at the stares shot in her direction.

“I ask that you hold back on questions, we will give you chance to ask them along the way.”

The classroom door opened and a group of new people entered. The youngsters' eyes nearly popped from their sockets. Apart from General Peters, the other four were not human.

"Close your mouth, John," his mum told him. "You'll be catching flies."

"Mum, but...they're not... Well... Look!"

Owen chuckled at his flustered friend.

The tallest of the four new arrivals spoke first after taking a seat. "Hello.

My name is Anise; I am Queen of the Fae. This is Anyk, Queen

of the Dwafkin, and our escort knights, Sir Emil and Sir Granthor."

There was something almost medieval about them. Queen Anise

was slender with stunning emerald-green eyes. Her long bronze hair was intricately braided down her back revealing pointed ears. Her face looked thinner than they were used to seeing and she had longer fingers. She was dressed in the most stunning royal blue dress of thick silk which reached just above the floor. Two intricate golden Celtic patterns ran from the neckline and joined the same pattern around the hem, her matching coloured shoes just poked out from under the dress. A large golden brooch shone in the light and there was a pure white cape with a hood attached to a golden chain around her neck.

Queen Anyk was in some ways the opposite of Queen Anise. She was short, around four feet tall, with a cheerful round face, beaming smile and brown hair with golden slides at each side. Her ears were also pointed, but not as long as the Fae Queen, which gave her away as not being human. She had an elegant dark green dress with similar golden patterns, matching shoes, brooch and white cape.

It was clear that Sir Emil was a male fae. Even though Sir Granthor was similar, he had unusual curved skin markings on each cheek and on the back of his hands. They were both dressed in black trousers, red tunics with golden Celtic patterns centred on them and black capes attached at the shoulder. They had swords by their sides on a leather belt around their waist.

"After the events of this morning it was decided to bring things forward a little. We weren't expecting to all be here until at least tomorrow," Talbot told the gathering. "Like I said, we have only recently become aware of this, so let me run through what we do know."

The youngsters sat waiting expectantly.

“Just over a week ago the government was approached by what could only be described as the best kept secret fraternity the world has known. They said they had an explanation for the raids and missing children. They have been waiting for these events for over one thousand four hundred years. The details were passed down from generation to generation, until today. Details passed to them by the Knights of the Round Table and none other than King Arthur himself. I see sceptical faces, but let me assure you the government was just a sceptical, but the record they were presented with was quite persuasive and they decided to, if only cautiously, accept what they were being told. Last night was the proof when, as our guest called it, a Travel Bridge arrived on the hillside behind the school.”

John shot a glance in Owen’s direction; his face told Owen that this was going to be more than he could handle.

“We’ve learnt that we’re not the only ones losing children to these monstrous creatures; they have been invading our new friends’ lands also. The difference is they destroy everything, and murder parents and others in the villages or towns raided along with the kidnappings. We have also discovered that something was prepared back in King Arthur’s time that is said to help with the problem. Strange as it seems, we need your help – well, mainly young Owen’s and Mary’s.”

The two youngsters looked nervously at each other.

“Let me hand over to Queen Anise to give you more details, then we’ll break for questions and something to eat.” He looked at the general who nodded, got up and left the room.

“Hello, it’s nice to finally meet you,” she said in a soothing and calm voice. “I know you’ll have many questions, I hope you will find the answers to many of them over the next few minutes or so. Let me start by explaining why Owen and Mary are needed. The object or whatever it is that the Great King prepared...” She looked at the confused faces in front of her as Talbot whispered something to her. Realising what had puzzled them, she rephrased her words, “Sorry, the Great King being King Arthur. Whatever he left for us is hidden, and we need to open his and Queen Guinevere’s library to find it. To do this we need the rightful descendants of both the king’s and the queen’s families, which happens to be to Owen’s and Mary’s”

“We learnt that your father was killed in an accident, which leaves you, Mary, as the rightful descendant. Your aunt has explained everything to us, and we know that their loss still hurts very much. Owen, your mother feels that you would be better suited to help Mary, so she has allowed you the responsibility – all be it under your parents’ supervision.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Owen said with a glare.

Anise smiled at him. “Don’t worry, you’ll both have all the help you need. This no doubt comes as a surprise to you and the implications are great. The first being that both your families are royal in respect to the lands of Albion.”

More confused faces.

“Sorry, Albion is a federation made up of six planets, Earth being the sixth planet. I know that opens what I believe you call a can of worms, but we will try to answer the questions it brings up later. As I was saying, Owen’s and Mary’s families have royal lineage.”

“What does that make them?” John blurted. “John,” warned his mum.

“Well, John,” continued Anise calmly, “it makes Owen’s parents king and queen representing Earth in Albion. Although, some of that has been passed to Owen, or should I say Prince Owen. Mary becomes Princess Mary.”

“We are who?” Owen asked for the both of them. Mary and Owen exchanged more fearful looks. “Rose also becomes a princess.”

Before Anise could say anything else, Rose butted in, “See Owen, I *am* a princess.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“Brill,” Owen said, “Princess Wakey Brother Monster, then,” he added, creating more laughter.

“That makes us princesses also,” chimed the twins.

“Great, we’ll never hear the end of that.” This time John was warned by his dad for that retort.

“Claire’s and John’s families are friends of Owen and Mary mentioned in *The Book*—”

“*The Book*?” Owen asked.

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“We will take a break now. No doubt you have many questions on the lineage, which can be answered by Queen Anyk, Mr Rosset and Mrs Jackson’s records. There is a buffet in the dining hall,” Talbot told them.

#

As you can imagine, the youngsters gathered to talk about what they had just heard.

“Don’t think you’re getting away,” Claire told Emily. “You knew all this, didn’t you?” asked Mary.

Emily nodded. “I was told not to say anything. Trust me, I wanted to tell you. It’s like me nine days ago being told I was the daughter of the chairperson of this super-secret society that has been in existence over fourteen hundred years. They call you the ‘progeny of times concealed’.”

“You had no clue?” asked Meg.

“None,” Emily replied. “Not to mention there’s something called *The Book of Times*.”

“*The Book of Times*?” asked the twins.

“I want to see the proof,” Owen told them all. “Me too,” added Mary.

“So you’re not a princess?” John asked Emily. “No,” she replied.

“Thought all girls desired the title ‘princess’,” blurted John. “Ignoramus,” said Lottie, clipping his head.

“Hey,” he complained. “Do you know how many brain cells you’ve just mushed?”

“Hey, ‘Princess Charlotte’, don’t you mean?”

John gave her a disgusted look as everyone laughed again. “Well, this is going to be fun,” said Claire.

They reached the dining room and helped themselves to some food. “Well?” Rowena asked joining the youngsters.

“It’s a bit much,” Mary replied.

“It’s the implications,” added Owen.

“Prince and princess representing the Earth. I can see it now as every nation tries to gain the favour of these two and the pressure that comes

with it. They're not even trained for it," said Claire, agitation brewing in her voice.

"Owen's parents and I talked about this briefly earlier. That is something we are not prepared to allow," Rowena told them. "Details to follow, though. It's something that needs planning. Queens Anise and Anyk have something in mind, and they said they'd talk about it later."

"That's something," Claire practically spat the words. "Why so irritated?" asked Owen.

She looked at her best friend. "She, as you know, is not over the death of her parents – now this."

"I know," he replied. "She still has us, that hasn't changed."

#

Rose wandered over to the two knights with Meredith.

"Hello," Sir Emil said to her, "you must be Princess Rose, and you Meredith?"

They nodded in agreement.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Princess."

"Why have you got pointy ears?" Rose finally asked. "Why are your ears round?" he asked by way of an answer.

Rose felt her ears while she puzzled over an answer. "Because I was born with round ears."

"That's the same reason I have pointy ears. I was born with them."

Rose screwed her face in thought before answering, "Oh, right," with sudden clarity.

Meredith, on the other hand, was fascinated with Sir Granthor's face and hand markings. "Do you paint them on your face and hands?" he asked.

"Well, I'm an elven and we are born with these markings. They indicate which clan I am from. These show I'm from the Forest clan."

"Do you live in a forest, then?" asked Meredith.

"No, not at the moment, but the rest of my family does," he answered. "Do they live in tree houses?" Rose asked.

"I bet that's coooool," Meredith said smiling. "Cool?" Granthor puzzled.

“Excellent, fantastic, marvellous, wonderful,” interrupted the twins by way of an explanation.

“Oh, right,” Granthor replied. He raised an eyebrow trying to wrap his head around the meanings just given to him.

“So how many other clans are there?” Megan asked.

“Well, lots. Along with Forest Elven, we have Woodland, Rock, Mountain, Cave, River – the list is quite long. Each has a different clan marking.”

“What if you marry a say, erm, a Rock Elven, what marks do any children get, is it a new one?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh no. They get the father’s markings,” he replied. “Typical,” Megan scoffed.

“It’s never the mothers, always the dads,” Charlotte added.

Granthor burst out laughing. “It’s always been that way, Highnesses.” “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah,” they replied in unison.

“I hope you’re behaving yourselves!” their mother interrupted. “Yes, Mum,” they huffed.

The little ones were now caught up in a story being told by Sir Emil. At home the Fae Knight was known as Sir Emil of Pedrall the Story Teller. He would tell stories at any opportunity, which made him popular with young children wherever he went.

From their expressions, Rose and Meredith were thoroughly enjoying it. John joined Owen as he looked through his genealogy.

“This is incredible,” Owen told him.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” he replied.

Owen chuckled. “You seem calmer, taken a chill pill?” “Mum made me,” he replied.

“There, look, Arthur Pendragon.” Owen pointed to the records. “Unbelievable.”

“Yours too?” asked Mary.

“Looks like it,” Owen said. “Take a look,” he offered, giving up his chair.

Mary asked Anyk to show Owen her genealogy as Claire joined him. “The Leodegrance family?” asked Owen.

“Queen Guinevere’s family name,” Anyk told him.

“There’s no chance the records are wrong?” he Owen.

Anyk chuckled. "My dear Prince, there is no recorded genealogy that has been so closely followed and written as yours and the princesses," she said smiling. "This must be a huge shock to you; your heads must be spinning."

"I don't think 'spinning' quite explains it," confessed Owen. "Have you checked the records, then," Anise's voice cut in. Owen nodded as she smiled at him.

"We need to carry on with the presentation," Anise told Anyk.

#

Back in the classroom, the queens carried on with their explanation.

Anise was telling them, "To open the door you need to use the keys which are King Arthur's and Guinevere's swords and they are linked to your life codes. I think you call it DNA."

"Surely that's changed over the years," said Owen.

"There are some things we cannot explain. This is one of them. It should, hopefully, give us access to some of the information we're missing."

"Yes, indeed, there are a few mysteries which we hope will become apparent in time," added Anyk.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but without you we have no hope of finding what the Great King hid for us," confessed Anise.

"Why do you call him the 'Great King'?" John asked.

"We can explain that later," Anise replied. "We need to know if you're willing to help."

Mary turned to her aunt, then out of character announced, "I'm going, no one else is going to get hurt if I can help it!"

The group fell silent and looked over at Mary in utter surprise. Owen looked at his parents. "Mizzy can't do this without me," he told them.

"Are you sure?" they asked.

"No, but I can't let her do this alone."

"Your choice," said his dad. "If you go, we do also."

"Owen's going to need us," the twins added to the surprise of Aunt Bronnie.

With John's and Claire's families adding their confirmation, the next thing was to prepare them for travel.

#

Getting the families ready to travel had taken some time; unlike the squad of soldiers who just accepted the assignment they were given.

Claire, it could be said, had finally found her voice and the questions came flooding out. They were reasonable questions too: How do you know so much about us? So, you have spies watching us? How is it that both the prince and princess live in the same town? So you manoeuvred their families so they lived near each other?

When they were given a ring that was set only to work with their specific genetics, Claire asked how they get their DNA to set the rings and swords.

Meredith only asked, "Are there any dinosaurs?"

John's questions were mainly about how the Travel Bridge worked, spaceships and other science fiction things.

Owen and Mary just stood and listened as they accepted their rings and a brooch to identify them as royals; similar to the brooches the queens were wearing – they looked out of place on their school uniforms.

They now stood in front of the Travel Bridge, and they couldn't fail to be overwhelmed by the sight. It was around twenty feet tall, slightly smaller in width and had cut itself into the hillside. It looked like polished crystal and smooth to the touch, but it was like no rock seen on Earth. It glowed and the structure took on a different colour depending on the angle you looked at it. It reminded Owen of a science class when a light was directed through a prism and split into the colours of the rainbow.

"It's not radioactive?" John asked.

"Not in the least," one of the science boffins replied while waving some gizmo at the structure and noting the readings.

Owen looked at the decoration. It started with a central paved area, which was slightly raised on both sides to separate the walking section of the paving. On the raised areas were depictions of planets, peoples and animals carved into the rock. Owen noticed each side was the same. The doorway itself was about ten feet wide and arched.

Directly above the arch was writing in a strange language which he found out meant 'Earth Bridge'.

On both sides of the opening were carvings of the most magnificent dragons breathing fire at a funny-looking star. The star was depicted above one of the archways in each of the planetary capital cities. Owen made a mental note; his Sherlock curiosity was aroused.

Rowena was looking at the carved drawings on one side of the paving when Owen backed into her.

"Oh. Sorry," Owen apologised.

"That's quite all right, Your Highness," she replied bobbing a small curtsy.

"Aunt Rowie," Mary hushed voice cut in, "we said no special treatment."

"Can't I tease," her aunt began. "Oh, yes, I forgot he's your man." She chuckled at the two embarrassed new royals.

"Great, a third twin," said Owen.

"A third twin?" Rowena laughed.

"Your aunt has not been taking lessons from Tilly and Flop over there, has she?" He pointed to his cousins.

"I hope not," Mary answered.

"I did hear something about Katherine Jenkins, mind you. I hope you're not going to hurt my wonderful niece."

"Brill, definitely a third twin," moaned Owen.

The twins were examining what the archway was made from while giving some poor boffin earache about what they had learnt, which was a big fat nothing.

"Are we ready, then?" asked Anise.

"Erm, suppose so," Owen replied.

"If I take the prince and princess and their immediate family through first, the rest can follow. You will no doubt be met by my overly excited daughter, Estrellita, who has not stopped talking about meeting you since she found out you're coming," Anise warned.

The first group nervously stepped through the archway and waited.

John eagerly watched from the paving curious about how the thing worked, something Queen Anyk took note of. John spent most of the time questioning her about the technical workings of the gadgets they had brought with them.

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There was a flash of light, not very bright, and the first group vanished. “Whoa,” said John.

The science boffin looked frustrated; they had learnt nothing from the use of the bridge.

“Your world hasn’t the equipment to take readings from the archway,” Anyk whispered to John who noticed their frustration.

The second group made their way to the archway, which was mainly made up of the soldiers accompanying them, one of the knights, Claire’s family and Emily with her mum.

A few seconds later the last group stood ready for their journey. The twins joined John who, under the circumstances, didn’t mind them being there as long as Megan didn’t try to hold his hand, link arms or kiss him. John watched the view of the tarpaulin disappear.

What, Still No Royal Blood?

“**W**hat!” bellowed the neatly bearded human. He slammed his fists down on the large wooden table before him. “You got ninety-six and you’re telling me that we still have no royal life codes – no royal blood that matches the Great King in our mornings captives. You told me this area was his home town.”

“Yes, Baron, but you must understand it has been many years since he was the Earth’s council representative and things have changed,” grovelled the strange-looking attendant.

“No excuses, I want the prince and princess before those fumbling Albion’s get their hands on them.”

“We’re doing our best with what records we have, and the man we captured during the trials isn’t saying much, I’m afraid.”

“*We’re doing our best with what records we have,*” mocked the baron. “Yes, you need to be afraid because it will be your head if the emperor finds out we’re taking children from Earth.”

“My head!” squeaked the attendant.

“Yes, your head! This time we’ll make sure you’re suitably clean and smelling of fresh meat before throwing you in the Kronkle Pit.”

A couple of troll guards sniggered remembering the last time he was thrown to the Kronkle. His stench had the poor beasts trying to climb out rather than eat him.

“Silence,” the baron bellowed.

The trolls fell silent.

“Since their life codes have no match to the Great King’s, maybe they can give us some information about the whereabouts of the royals.”

“I tried questioning them, but they just went that funny green-looking colour and emptied their stomach contents onto the floor.”

“Maybe if you smelt better that wouldn’t happen,” the baron sarcastically sneered.

The attendant tried smelling himself.

The baron rolled his eyes upwards and shook his head in disbelief. “In fact, go and bring me the adult you said was brought back. Maybe she’s more familiar with the Great King. I’ll question her myself. Maybe if she isn’t gagging she’ll be more forthcoming.”

“At once, Your Supremeness,” the dutiful attendant replied.

“You two,” the baron barked at the two troll guards, “sling him into a fragrance bath before he fetches her.”

The trolls looked at each other before moving slowly towards the stinking attendant. With one hand each they lifted him off the ground and held their noses with their other hands in the vain hope of not smelling him.

“But, sire, the fragrance bath will damage my skin,” complained the attendant as he was marched out.

“It’s a miracle your skin hasn’t run off by itself in protest,” the baron replied.

#

In the dungeons, the new captives from Tintagel were being acquainted with the children taken in the earlier raids.

It had taken a while to calm down the youngest after they were snatched from school, brought to this strange place, had samples of hair and blood taken, and then slung into a huge cage that looked as if it was made for a giant creature rather than to hold prisoners.

Some of the children were explaining things to the teacher while the others entertained the smaller school captives.

“What happened to you?” asked Miss Peppard looking at the bruising on Brian, one of the Camelford boys.

“I tried to escape and get help,” replied Brian. “I didn’t get very far before being smashed to the ground by two ogre guards.”

“It seems we’re on some sort of moon. There’s a giant ringed planet hanging in the sky,” Sue told Miss Peppard.

“I take it escaping is out of the question?”

“That would be yes. Try and you’ll end up looking like me,” Brian replied.

“Or worse,” added another.

“What else can you tell me? They gave us the third degree about some Great King when we arrived,” said Miss Peppard.

“King Arthur,” a girl named Molly replied.

“I had a feeling it was him,” the teacher said with a smile, “or else why raid our area of the country.”

“We told them he was a legend and not a real historical figure,” added Molly.

“Well, there are indications he existed but not like we see depicted in the movies. He was more of a local king ruling a small area, not the whole country,” Miss Peppard said.

“They make him out to be this really important person and they’re looking for his descendants,” Molly replied.

“Good luck to them, I wouldn’t think that any records exist—” the teacher began.

“Unless they have genetic evidence,” interrupted Molly.

“Of course!” said Miss Peppard now realising. “Hair and blood samples. I think it would take time to analyse the results, though.”

“They’re well in front of us technologically speaking,” stated Carl. “They reset Bri’s broken arm in a matter of minutes with no plaster.”

“Broken arm?” said the teacher looking puzzled at the youngster’s arm. “Really broken,” Brian replied indicating it was a clean snap.

“How did they mend that type of broken bone in minutes?” Miss Peppard looked bewildered.

“Re-aligned the bone and ran some whizzy thing over it,” Brian replied.

“Left you covered in bruises, though,” Miss Peppard said, stating the obvious.

“Yep, supposedly to show us the consequences of trying to escape,” said Carl.

“You’d better prepare the kids for a long stay. I can’t see them letting us go in the near future,” Brian sadly told the teacher.

“Who are all these others?” asked the teacher.

“They’re from other planets in some confederation called Albion. What’s strange is they all know about Earth and the Great King Arthur, but we know a big fat nothing about them.”

“They look like they’ve come out of some fairy tale.”

“Funny you should say that,” Molly said going on to explain that they were fairies, elves and other creatures from mythology.

“You!” one of the troll guards bellowed pointing at the teacher.

“What do you want now?” She stared back at the fearsome guard.

“You will come with me,” the attendant said as he appeared. “Oh, great, it’s Sir Stink-A-Lot,” Gemma, a Castleford girl, called.

“I have been bathed,” he replied at the same time the troll guard held his nose in jest behind him.

“Has it made any difference?” another voice called.

“Looks like his skin has broken out in hives,” added another. “I have sensitive skin,” he pompously replied.

“Sensitive skin, you say. I’m surprised you had skin under the muck you usually wear,” added another.

Ignoring the mocking he was receiving, he continued with his orders. “The baron wants to speak with you.”

“Well, maybe I have a few words for him, too,” the teacher spat back.

A troll guard opened the cage to let her out. The teacher complied by exiting before turning to tell the captives he would have done better if he’d changed his clothes as well.

The caged children burst out laughing.

#

Meanwhile, the baron had received notice that Queen Anise and Queen Anyk had gone to Earth and met with the Great King’s descendants. He was fuming when his attendant returned with the teacher.

“The earthling you wanted to speak to, sire,” the attendant announced as he entered room.

“So, you’re in charge?” Miss Peppard snapped.

“Huh?” The baron looked surprised at the sudden question.

“I demand you release us immediately and send us home at once.”

“Silence. You dare come here and demand release?” He glared at the teacher. “Get used to captivity. You’re going nowhere until I say so.”

“You cannot keep small children from their parents, it’s —” “I can do whatever I want,” he sneered.

“We want to know where the Great King’s descendants are,” interrupted the attendant, hoping to avert a full-blown confrontation.

“Even if I knew who this Great King is, what gives you any idea that I would tell you!” Miss Peppard told him.

“As if that’s going to be any good now,” the baron informed the attendant.

“What’s happened?” the attendant asked.

“Anise and Anyk have travelled to Earth and have by now been in contact with our targets.”

The attendant wasn’t expecting that response.

Something suddenly registered in the back of the teacher’s mind about the military pouring into a Welsh town. *Could it be the descendants they’re looking for live there? Maybe there is a chance of rescue*, she thought to herself.

“Where have they been found?”

“Well, we don’t know because your watchers are more useless, bumbling idiots than you are,” yelled Baron Ryndore.

He hasn’t a clue where they are, thought Miss Peppard. *That’s hopefully good news*. She smiled before a horrible thought struck. *Military pouring into the town would mean they would be treated as enemies first*. Suddenly rescue seemed an unreasonable hope – her heart sank.

“He waffled on about only the High Council knowing the whereabouts of the bridge,” ranted the baron.

Bridge, thought Miss Peppard, *a bridge sounds more of a permanent fixture than the vortex they were brought through*. *There’s more going on here than meets the eye*.

“Surely a Travel Bridge appearing on Earth after such a long time would create a stir that wouldn’t go unnoticed and cause reaction from Earth’s military,” the attendant countered.

What is he on about? After such a long time? Have these Travel Bridges been on Earth before? What are they and why no historical references? Yet, she thought, *trolls were mythical creatures until this morning*. *Nevertheless*,

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here they are and the stranger looking children with them in the cage knew about Earth.

“Surely they have to be captives. Two of their feeble knights along with the two queens. Not much chance they could escape, and they couldn’t expect rescue from those peace-loving Albions,” the attendant said.

“Did you not hear me? They’ve met with the descendants.”

“Oh, yes, you did mention that,” the attendant confirmed.

“You underestimate the queens, and from the times your watcher provided we raided Tintagel after they arrived,” roared the baron.

“After they were captured,” the attendant gloated. “It will look like retaliation for their imprisonment.”

“Not if the queens produce evidence that we’ve raided their land also,” snapped the baron.

“Surely that would be difficult if not impossible for them to prove,” replied the attendant.

Miss Peppard felt it was time to say something, even if it was to keep the two antagonists at each other’s throats so she could glean more information. “If they’ve been sent as ambassadors, they would have to be treated as such.”

“See, you bumbling idiot.”

“What you’re not seeing, my smelly friend, is what the baron is seeing. Your later raid and our capture will galvanise them together to get us back,” said the teacher.

“What you don’t know is that the Albions are peaceful wimps of a people with no armies and no interest in war. To them you’re simply gone with no chance of return. To hope of any rescue is to believe that they’ll have a sudden change in attitudes and beliefs. You may as well accept you’re not going to be rescued in some daring counter raid.”

“I’m sorry, but on that point I would have to agree with my stinky attendant,” the baron added.

“Well, the United Kingdom has an army—”

“They have no way of getting here,” interrupted the baron, “and the Albions will not allow your armies to use their lands to mount a rescue.”

Miss Peppard had no reply to the bleak outlook.

“You wouldn’t know by chance where this bridge is, would you?” asked the baron with a smile.

“No. If some strange bridge suddenly appeared, the last thing the authorities would say is where it had appeared,” Miss Peppard replied. “Especially after your raiding parties. It would become a state secret until it was deemed no danger to the public.”

“Surely you must have some idea,” said the attendant. “No, haven’t a clue,” lied the teacher.

“Where are my manners? Miss Peppard, I believe, please take a seat,” the baron invited.

The teacher sat in a plush high-backed chair. “Welcome to Exillia—”

“If you call what we have experienced a welcome, then you have a funny way of welcoming guests. I have to again insist you return us home at once,” Miss Peppard stated. “We are obviously not what you’re looking for.”

“Well, that discussion is for another time. For the time being we have no intention of returning you home,” the baron bluntly replied.

“Why not?” demanded the teacher, getting tired of the negative responses.

“We never let Earth captives go as they’re used as life code samples. You, on the other hand, have been treated a lot differently. But any more attempts to escape or interfere with our objectives and things will change,” said the baron.

“I have not heard of other captives...”

“Until recently we’ve only been able to open our portal in one area of Earth. I believe you call it ‘The Devils’ or ‘Bermuda Triangle’,” said the baron smiling.

“You’re the cause of strange disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle? Pull the other leg,” scoffed the teacher.

“Come,” invited the baron.

Miss Peppard was led over to a balcony overlooking the palace courtyard where he had displayed the famous ‘Flight 19’ in pride of place. She couldn’t help but think that if the United States got wind of this information there would be serious trouble. The USA would want to put an end to the abductions; although, now it would be almost impossible as they had somehow found a way of opening the portals wherever they wanted to.

“So how is it now you can open these vortexes in other places?” quizzed the teacher.

“The Bermuda Triangle has some unique magnetic qualities enabling us to open the portals. Although it was troublesome being over an ocean. Recently, however, we’ve found a way of circumventing the need for these magnetic abnormalities and can open portals at will, wherever we wish. It has led to great opportunities in capturing peoples not only from Earth but also from the lands of Albion,” the baron proudly told her.

“You know you messed with the USA capturing those planes, and who are these Albions you keep mentioning?” she asked.

“Come, sit down. It’s as you would say ‘a long story’,” said the baron. Miss

Peppard sat back in the plush chair to listen to the baron. She hoped his willingness to talk openly would answer a few of the nagging questions she had circling around her head. Any information was useful if they were to find a way to get out of this place, so she reconciled herself to listening to his long story.

“The Albion Confederation is thousands of years old and at its full strength comprises of six worlds: Arial, Sanmara, Avalon, Earth, Lomara and Radinica. The federation is the home of a variety of differing species. You may know them as human, the fae or fairies, elven – the list goes on. They all get along peacefully.

“The one problem they have is that the different species cannot have children. For instance, a human cannot have a child with an elven, and so on. This caused a problem with many mixed marriages and their desire for offspring.

“The scientists in the federation were scientifically well advanced of Earth and set about solving this dilemma to bring families their desired offspring. There was a great deal of research being done in the field of life codes, and it was decided the solution to the problem lay in the coding.”

“By life code do you mean DNA, genetic codes?” asked the teacher. “I do believe you call it the genetic code but ‘life code’ seems a friendlier term, don’t you think? It wasn’t long until the codes were fully understood and the scientists set about the task of interspecies children. But things didn’t quite go as planned. The trollicans and ogres were the results of their first attempts at Cross Life Code Amalgamation,” continued the baron.

“Transgenics,” the teacher corrected.

“You know of the science?”

“You could say that?”

“Interesting, it seems Earth science is more advanced than we anticipated. This is good news,” he gloated.

“I have to say it’s not a very popular science with people; many believe messing with genetics is delving into areas that shouldn’t be altered.”

“Very Albion,” said the baron indicating his disapproval.

“Playing God is not something many believe to be taken lightly.”

“But they are gods,” announced the baron. “Many of your beasts of history would never have existed if it wasn’t for the gods of science.”

“Like what?” the teacher asked.

“You’ve no doubt heard of the minotaur, sirens, the centaurs and gryphons. They were all products of an Albion scientist.”

“So you’re telling me that over two thousand years ago a scientist from Albion created these mythological monster creatures via transgenics?”

“Along with many others, but the original problem continued: the answer to the children of mixed-species marriages was not forthcoming.” “So you could create monsters but not compatible children? Surely a God could get around the problem?” the teacher jibbed.

“For thousands of years the problem remained, then a great mistake by one scientist and the tide turned against the experiment. A super creature was created—”

“You mean a super monster!” Miss Peppard interrupted.

“Whatever you want to call it, it was both terrifying and marvellous. It escaped confinement, then went on to devastate nearby towns killing all the inhabitants until your King Arthur cornered it and killed it.

“King Arthur had just become head of the Albion High Council and of that round piece of furniture then proposed a law banning, as you call it, transgenics. The law passed with no opposition. A more controversial law was also passed banning cross-species marriages.

“At the same time, a movement for peace had a grip on the leaders of Albion; wars and planetary disputes were to become a thing of the past. A few scientists who disagreed with the new laws went into hiding to carry on their research in secret, but they were hunted down along with their followers and creations.”

“They were captured, then?”

“That’s right. This moon had just been transformed into a viable place to live, so the now peaceful Albions decided not to execute the law breakers but to exile them here, cutting them off from sources of life code material they needed in order to continue their research.”

“At least they weren’t executed.”

“King Arthur also decided, at the end of his time as head of the High Council, that Earth should be cut off from the rest of the federation because its inhabitants were not yet ready to embrace peace in the same way the other planets had. Only a few humans remained after Earth was abandoned, and this is where the descendants of King Arthur were trapped.

“They later named him the Great King for his foresight and exploits in making sure peace that had started in his reign became a permanent lasting legacy.

“What the idiot Albions hadn’t realised was that we managed to bring aconlite crystal – a powerful energy source. It has the ability to regenerate its power – an everlasting power source that can be used for the most energy-hungry machines and experiments. When they realised their mistake, it was too late. The only trouble was we couldn’t use it against them at the time, but it did allow us into the Bermuda Triangle on Earth.

“Now, with our recent developments, the Albions themselves are no longer safe from our raids – like the rest of Earth. We have raided their planets, and they have no way of preventing us from doing so.”

“Why would you want to raid their planets?” quizzed the teacher.

“Revenge, of course! Why else?” He looked confused by the question.

“Payback.”

“You want revenge on the Albions because they exiled you to a freshly made moon ready to accept life and didn’t execute your ancestors. If that’s not the pettiest excuse I’ve ever heard.”

“You can call it what you want; they will pay for their arrogance.” “Baron, news,” the attendant reluctantly interrupted.

“Go on, do tell,” yelled the baron.

“Our watchers have reported that Earth’s representatives have arrived on Avalon with their whole families.”

“Did they say where they came from?”

“No, Baron, they still have no clue where their bridge was materialised.”

“Useless waste of time,” roared the baron.

Miss Peppard could only chuckle to herself. All this talk of improvements getting to different places and he still couldn’t find out where his targets were.

“I need to think. The effort to track them down with no results cannot go in our favour if the emperor finds out.”

“The emperor doesn’t know that you’ve taken captives from Earth, I take it?” Miss Peppard quizzed.

“Take the teacher back to the cage,” the baron demanded.

Miss Peppard noticed a small non-human face peeking out from behind the curtains and was now aware that someone else had heard the conversation.

The information had not given her an immediate way out, but most important was the emperor being oblivious to the secret raids the baron had carried out on Earth. How she was to use that information was unclear, but it was useful nonetheless.

As she approached the dungeons she could hear the children singing, obviously attempting to take their minds off the situation they found themselves in.

As she turned the corner, the children had an audience made up of the strangest creatures she had ever seen. Trolls and ogres she recognised, but others like the hoppers and grunthers she hadn’t seen before. There was also a passive creature that the others bullied around called a nubin.

#

Back in the cage, a group formed to hear what Miss Peppard had learnt. News about locating the Great King’s descendants was welcome news to the youngsters from the unknown planets of Albion. They went on to explain why they were important. Finding the secret hidden away by the Great King could stop the raids. This was good news for the teacher, but their captivity was still a problem. The younger children had squeezed in close to the teacher, who was trying her best to console them while she listened. She knew most of the children from the school and was known as a kind caring teacher, so seeing all the upset and fear in their eyes and knowing that she could do little to comfort them was deeply upsetting.

When the teacher retold the part about the scientists and their experiments, the Albion children filled in the story with more information.

"It is true that there were tests to find a solution for interspecies children. They lasted quite a while and produced some monstrosities. In addition to the ones you were told about, some were so dangerous that whole continents had to be evacuated while the creatures, or what we call Abominations, were dealt with," one of the children called Rhoban told them. "In fact, what the baron left out was the war it all led to."

"War?" asked Brian.

"A war that spurred the movement for peace," added Loranda, an elven girl.

"The Great King saw to it that the war ended but at a horrendous price during the battle of Badon Plain where, to defeat the Abomination Army, a new weapon made from crystal found in a meteorite was used. So powerful was this device that even today the plain and surrounding area are completely devastated and barren. There is a fissure down the centre so deep that the molten rock flowed freely like a river," said Rhoban.

"A river of lava," Carl said in shock.

"That's some nuke," Molly added.

"If I've understood from previous discussions, a nuclear weapon leaves a radioactive residue. The crystal device left no such harmful effects." Leax, another of the strange girls, said. "You just vanish if you stay there too long." "The Great King addressed the then council at Camelot about exiling the rest of the scientists and creatures to the moon named Exillia. Reaching agreement left room for the rest of Albion to make peace," said Rhoban. "With the exception of Earth which was still fragmented, warlike and cut off until it was more like the other planets. The wording about Earth was later strangely changed to 'Until the Time of the Return'; this was to be when raiders came to Albion, as *The Book of Times* mentions. No one knew when this was. Many felt it was not the time, but the more raids that occurred and the destruction and death that came with them, the people became convinced this must be 'The Time of the Return', and things were put into action to contact the Great King's descendants. It must be that decision that has caused the raids leading to your captivity."

"What do people think this 'Time of the Return' to be?" the teacher asked.

“There are many different views,” Loranda began. “Some think it’s the time of Earth’s reunion with the rest of Albion, having become a unified planet.”

“Your description of Earth now tells us that cannot be the explanation,” Leax pointed out.

“Others felt it would be a reunion with Exillia – again wrong,” added Loranda.

“I wouldn’t be too quick to dismiss both,” Miss Peppard pointed out. “It could be the start of one, if not both, viewpoints. Only time will tell.”

“True, there are many other theories floating around, those are the main ones,” Rhoban said.

Food and water arrived. It looked disgusting and there was not enough to go around.

“What is it?” asked one of the schoolchildren.

“We don’t ask in case it’s... Well, you get the idea,” replied Mark from Bude.

“Tastes icky,” complained one of the smaller children.

“Eat up, it’s back to work tomorrow,” an ogre ordered.

The teacher sat thinking about what she had learnt. One thing stuck out clearly: all of this had been foretold. She made a mental note to ask about *The Book of Times* as it may be connected to their current state.

Camelot

Owen and his group stepped under an archway into a large hall. Along the marble walls the light shone through lancet windows and glinted off the smartly dressed sentries with decorated golden halberds. Hanging from the high ceiling in between the windows were heavy deep-red velvet-like banners with royal blue and gold borders. Various insignias were emblazoned in gold thread. The floor was a reddish wood and highly polished.

The other end was dominated by a large doorway which led out of the hall onto a paved area. Carved into the marble around the doorway were two giant dragons that came up from the floor and met breathing fire at each other. In that fire there was a carving of a word centred above the archway. Owen decided it read 'Camelot'.

Queen Anise was right about one thing: as soon as they stepped from the archway they were greeted by an excited young fae who introduced herself as Estrellita. A human-looking girl stood a little way back before being introduced as Leandra. Owen noticed she had a brooch like his, which meant she had to be another princess.

After the introductions Owen was looking at the hall's chandeliers, hypnotised by their size and beauty.

"Incredible, aren't they?" Rowena said as she joined him. "Amazing," he replied.

He was snapped back to reality by John who was being ordered to calm down by his mum as he babbled uncontrollably about what had just happened.

"Sherlock," he began, having found Owen.

"Chill, mate. You're gonna explode if you keep this up," Owen interrupted.

“But—”

“*Chill!*”

“He reminds me of a certain little goobon; she’s been like that all morning,” Leandra told them.

“Goobon?” asked the twins together.

“You would call it a monkey,” Anyk translated.

“I’m not a goobon,” Estrellita objected. “Papa, they’re here,” she excitedly called as a male fae entered the hall.

“Must be the king,” said Mary quietly after joining her aunt. “Oh, this is where you’ve been,” he said.

Estrellita joined her father and began introducing the newcomers.

“Come,” he said, after welcoming everyone, “there’s a table of food waiting in the palace.”

“Good, I’m starving,” John blurted.

The king laughed and slapped his arm around the shoulder of an embarrassed John.

Estrellita found Owen and Mary and rushed them from the hall. “Let’s go!” she said excitedly.

“Next you’ll be telling me I have to pull a sword from a stone,” Owen joked.

“There are two swords. One for you and one for Mary to pull from the Earth stone. There will be a Sword Ceremony tomorrow for you.”

“Sword ceremony?” asked Mary.

“Yes, you both have swords, Excalibur for Prince Owen and Leoband for Princess Mary, and a ceremony where you retrieve them,” she said, smiling.

“Great,” replied Mary, her face saying anything but ‘great’.

“Whoa, slow down,” said Owen when Estrellita yanked them forward.

The sight that now greeted them could easily have been from a theme park. Directly in front was a huge white marble palace glowing in the afternoon sun.

Leading up to the palace was a wide block-paved walkway with spectacular fountains, banners and gardens on each side. People mingled on the walkway going about their business and others chatted with friends.

A little elven girl approached and gave them a curtsy, smiled and handed both Owen and Mary a bunch of flowers, she then ran off to join her mum.

Owen was surprised by the lack of security. There were no fenced-off areas, and no police or people being held back. The soldiers who came along to provide protection were edgy as the group walked the quarter of a mile to the palace, but it was clear the people were no threat, they just politely bowed or curtsied and carried on with their business.

Some approached giving flowers – so many that they had to be passed to others because Estrellita wasn't letting go of their hands as she skipped along.

One welcome had everyone in stitches. It started with a male voice calling, "Rolduf, slow down!" Then they saw what had happened.

Heading towards them was a yak-like creature pulling a cart loaded with vegetables and two legs sticking up into the air.

"Stop," yelled the owner of the feet.

As the creature drew close it slowed to a stop in front of Owen, Mary and Estrellita and gave each a good sniff.

Estrellita was obviously familiar with the yak bull and gave the beast a pat. Owen and Mary, on the other hand, had frozen in mid-step. It seemed to be drawn to Mary who gave it a nervous smile only to receive the biggest slobbery lick it could give.

Everyone fell about laughing – except Mary, of course. "Oh yuck," she complained.

On gaining his composure, the farmer started to apologise as slobber dripped from Mary's face. "I am really sorry, Highness. Oh dear, you're the new princess from Earth. Not the welcome you expected, I am sorry. He must like you, Princess, he doesn't normally do this."

It did release the tension of being in an unfamiliar place. "Now that's a new man," teased Rowena.

Mary shot a disgusted look at her aunt.

It didn't take much longer to reach the large gates of the palace. Owen was again fascinated by the intricate workmanship, but he didn't get a chance to look it over because Estrellita wasn't stopping.

They were greeted by the palace staff who formed lines along each side of the path to the main entrance. They all bowed or curtsied until the procession had completely passed and entered the palace.

Inside were more royals ready to meet them. They stood in front of a spectacular staircase leading up to a veranda that went around the sides of the entrance hall.

More fantastical chandeliers hung from the decorated high ceiling. The light reflecting off the marble walls gave the entrance a clean, bright and fresh look. More insignias hung neatly along the marble walls breaking up the reflective surfaces, giving the room warmth.

They were shown to a large dining room where there was a table laid out with all sorts of mouth-watering food, some looked familiar and others obviously local.

“Great, I’m starving,” John announced again.

“John!” his mum hushed him before he could embarrass them anymore. Owen and Mary were introduced to more royals gathered in the dining room.

They noticed the servants ate with everyone else as a number approached and introduced themselves, including their personal servants – something else to get used to.

Owen’s manservant was called Poppip, a well-dressed fae. Mary’s maid was called Grenda, a delphan who was about the same age. Owen’s parents weren’t sure who were the most uncomfortable – the personal servants or Owen and Mary.

A large person approached the youngsters. “Oh no,” said Leandra, cringing. “What?” asked Mary.

“My dad,” Leandra answered.

“Oh,” Owen said with a chuckle.

“Welcome, welcome,” boomed the voice from the large, muscular king. “It’s nice to finally put faces to the names.” He slapped a large hand on Owen’s shoulder before turning to Mary. “And what a pretty young woman.” He lifted her hand and placed a kiss on it causing Mary to blush.

“Dad, do you have to be so embarrassing?” complained Leandra. Owen noticed how much he was like Mary’s dad.

“Amthor, I hope you’re not embarrassing them,” asked Leandra’s mum as she approached.

“Would I do such a thing?”

“Yes,” answered Leandra.

The queen smiled and introduced herself as Mia.

John walked by being quizzed by Estrellita about why they were all dressed in the same clothes.”

“It’s our school uniform.”

W S Markendale

“Oh, don’t you wear anything you want?” she asked.

As they walked off Claire commented, “Those two are a great match.”

“If you mean they’ll talk each other’s ears off, I agree,” Leandra said chuckling.

The rest of the afternoon was spent talking to the never-ending stream of royals. The one that interested them most was Duke Elvin Sythen. He was the representative who looked after the human interest on the Grand Council, a duty that was now to fall on them.

Owen and Mary asked for advice on how the council worked, which went down well with the duke as he was hoping he could be of help to the new royals.

#

After the welcome gathering, Owen managed to find a quiet place on the large balcony at the front of the palace. He looked out over Camelot as the lights in the houses began to come on.

“There you are,” Mary’s hushed voice broke his silence.

“Apart from the odd bird, it’s quiet here,” he replied as she skulked to his side.

“This is a little...”

“Too much,” Owen finished knowing exactly how she was feeling.

“Yeah. The bowing, curtsying and servants checking in on you every couple of minutes, my head, well...”

“I’m not sure I’ll get used to it. It seems we’re all going to need time to come to terms with this,” he said gesturing to the palace and city. “Never mind the idea of being a prince and princess. My head is still spinning.”

“Yours and mine alike,” Mary agreed.

“I still want to know why there are the raids in the first place. The gaps in the explanation need to be filled in, and there are plenty of them.”

“They’ve promised to do that later,” Mary reminded him. “Um...”

Mary chuckled at his response. She settled next to him and looked over the city.

It was less than five minutes later when Rowena found them. “Oh, this is where you two lovebirds are hiding.”

“Aunty Rowie,” Mary objected.

Mary’s aunt laughed at her niece squirming uncomfortably.

“And here I am thinking that The Crazies were bad,” Owen told Rowena.

She just smiled. “They’re going to give us more of an explanation in the large lounge in about fifteen minutes,” she informed them.

“Um,” repeated Owen, causing Mary to chuckle again.

They heard the twins squeal as they walked to their living quarters. They turned a corner to see King Artemis giggling out of sight.

“Anyone got a large slipper,” asked Meg. “A huge one,” Lottie clarified.

A strange-looking creature with six legs, a flat-shaped body and a tail that looked more like a stinger exited their bedroom.

“Moobim, that’s where you’ve been,” Estrellita called excitedly.

The strange creature leapt into the princess’s open arms and began purring like a cat.

“It’s a six-legged flat-cat scorpion,” announced John who had come to see what had scared The Crazies.

“It moves more like a giant bug,” huffed Lottie.

“I know that giggle,” said Estrellita. “Papa, you didn’t put Moobim in their room, did you?”

“What, me?”

Estrellita shook her head knowing her father loved a joke.

John was rolling around the floor hysterical with laughter recalling their horrified faces.

Owen smiled to himself as he left Mary and entered his room expecting something to jump out at him. There was no creature, but he still got a scare when Poppip appeared and bowed his head.

“Does the prince need a change in clothing?”

The question caught Owen by surprise; he was used to seeing to himself.

“Eh, um, eh... It would be nice to get out of the school uniform, thank you,” he finally replied.

“Something relaxing, Highness. Let’s see.” He went over to a large walk-in wardrobe and vanished. A few seconds later he reappeared with denim-like trousers and a baggy shirt that felt like silk.

Owen disappeared into his en-suite, threw some water over himself and tidied his hair. He dressed into the change of clothes provided by Poppip, then headed to the large lounge.

John was a few paces in front with Estrellita. They were quizzing each other, so he held back not wanting to be caught up in the tirade of questions.

“What, no granting wishes,” John moaned. “Nope,” she replied.

“And no wings to fly, although you would have to shrink—”

“You earthlings come up with some strange descriptions of us,” she interrupted.

Owen chuckled before being shooed along by Claire. “Come on, move along,” her voice ordered from behind.

“What?” he replied absent-mindedly.

Claire and Emily joined him in walking through the palace. “Well, how is it to be a prince?” Claire asked.

Owen didn’t need to reply; his face said it all. The two girls laughed at him.

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it,” Emily said with a smirk. “Wait for me,” Mary called.

They stopped and looked around to see Mary hurrying along wearing a pair of the jean-like trousers and a silk-type blouse. Claire linked arms with her friend and they continued to walk to the next gathering.

#

The large lounge was filling up with parents, soldiers and the youngsters. Owen and the three girls found a large sofa and plonked themselves down to wait. John, who they had passed in the hallway, entered with Estrellita in tow.

“What, no magic?”

“No magic,” the princess confirmed. “And no fairy dust?”

“Nooo,” she replied.

“Well, that’s just not—”

“It will have to do,” Estrellita interrupted with a pompous air.

John screwed up his face as the other youngsters laughed.

“Sherlock!” John called. “Where have you been hiding?”

“We passed you in the hallway,” he replied.

“What do you think?” “Um...”

Mary laughed. “That’s his new word.”

“The pressure on you two,” he acknowledged.

“You’ve no idea,” Owen replied. “Although, you seemed to have hit it off with a certain princess.”

“She won’t leave me alone. I remind her of the brother, would you believe.” “Brother?” Claire quizzed.

“Died in the first raid here.” He paused and looked around to check no one else was listening. “Executed. Queen Anise has asked me to help a young delphan girl who witnessed it but hasn’t said a word since.”

“Really?” said Owen.

“I met her earlier,” John told them.

The twins entered, they were the last to arrive, and found seats. A minute or so later King Artemis asked for quiet and waited for everyone to settle down.

#

The meeting lasted over an hour, and the terrible story they were told answered most of their questions and observations.

They headed for the lounge in the Earth section of the palace and settled down to discuss what had just been explained.

“If there’s a reason for not messing with genetics, this is it,” John stated.

“You can’t blame them for wanting children,” his mum told him. “Well, it doesn’t come as much of a surprise that the different species cannot have offspring,” said Claire’s dad.

“Didn’t stop them from continuing,” spat Claire.

“Puts new meaning to ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’,” said Owen’s mum.

“It’s a fundamental law that differing creatures can’t have offspring. Cutting and splicing bits of DNA shouldn’t have worked, yet they’ve found a way around that problem.”

“With disastrous repercussions, Dad,” blurted Owen.

“It’s not surprising they passed the law banning interspecies marriage,” Claire reminded them.

“There is still the ‘Golstrude’,” mentioned Megan.

“That way you adopt someone from a different species into your family,” Lottie added.

“Semantics,” said John’s dad.

“I’d have to agree with that.” Owen’s dad nodded.

“Well, it answers a whole swathe of myths, legends and folk stories. Trolls, goblins, ogres, even those Greek monsters,” Mary announced after lifting her head from a book she had borrowed from Estrellita. “They didn’t stop at just the sentient species; they messed with the animal life, too. They went too far and paid the price for it.”

“And making weapons of it,” added Nicky, one of the soldiers who was looking through the book with Mary.

“That’s what really gets me angry,” Owen told them.

“Infuriates me,” snapped Claire. “That’s why this knowledge can’t get to Earth or we’ll have ‘Monster Rampage Part Two’.”

“I don’t think it will. The people over here would cut Earth off again if that was to happen,” John told them.

“I would have to agree with you,” said Colonel Rudhut nodding at John. “Besides, what we can learn here? The beneficial stuff is too valuable to ignore in favour of a notoriously failed genetics experiment.”

“And as we’ve already mentioned, Earth didn’t escape the last time,” reminded Owen.

“But remember the record is in myth and legends. Much like King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table,” Aunt Bronnie told them.

“Then there was the war. King Arthur and the then armies of Albion against their own science community and creations,” stated Claire, still angry.

“You have to read this book, it really is quite informative,” Mary mumbled with her head still buried in its pages.

“I’ll see if we can get more copies,” Owen replied. “Might be a good idea,” agreed Emily.

“So what else have we learnt?” asked David, Owen’s dad.

“They don’t use money, for starters,” Claire’s mum, Sandra, told everyone.

“What?” asked a confused Trevor, John’s dad.

“It’s some form of ‘I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine’ system,” Claire’s dad, Greg, began.

“They have places in several areas where you post requests for work to be done,” Sandra continued.

“The youngsters are expected to help out with little things.” “Twelve years and over,” Sandra clarified.

“I do know that no one needs for anything,” Rowena added. “Everyone has a home and crime is non-existent,” Owen’s mum, Marg, added.

“They really have no army, just the knights and the Honour Guards,” Colonel Rudhut told the group.

“Now that I like,” Claire said.

“That means they’ve had it if there’s a full-blown invasion,” Sonya, one of the soldiers, told them.

“I’m not convinced they’re completely defenceless,” Owen said. “Something tells me there’s a lot we’re missing.”

“A hunch, eh, Sherlock?” John squinted. “More of a gut feeling.”

“Hiding something?” Lottie squinted suspiciously.

“Leave it to us, we’ll find it,” added Meg.

“We still have the possibility of spies,” Mary reminded everyone. “You can leave them to us too,” said Lottie, smiling.

“Well, I pity any spy *you* find.” John laughed. “Just make sure I’m nowhere near if you come across them.”

“There were some interesting characters around today. See those cave elves?” asked Emily.

“The ones that could pass as Goths, you mean?” Maureen looked at her daughter.

“Yep, those ones,” Emily answered.

Her mum shook her head. “Huh.”

“There was that group of girls that seemed to follow us around,” John told the group.

“You mean those you named the ‘Giggly Girls’, yes?” Owen laughed. “I’m telling you, you’ve been seeing things.”

“They are there, you’ll see.”

“What about this delphan Yendah girl?” Claire asked.

“Nothing much to say except Queen Anise and Sir Emil thought I could help her as she hasn’t said a word since witnessing the first attack,” John replied.

“That was over six months ago,” Rudhut reminded them. “Pity her,” said Meg.

Lottie concluded, “He’ll go insane.”

“Ha, ha,” responded John sarcastically.

“Some form of aphonia,” David mused.

John’s dad said, “Brought on by shock.” “Poor mite,” added Marg.

“Well, I can now hear her first word in over six months,” Meg teased. “And what would that be?” Bronnie asked.

“Shut-up,” the twins said in unison. “Girls, that’s not nice,” their mum scolded.

“That’s two words,” corrected John.

There was a knock at the door and a familiar smiley face appeared. “We’ll be having supper in ten minutes in the palace library.” With that, Estrellita disappeared.

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Once they were in the library the conversation took a more relaxed tone giving them a chance to get to know one another better. Those from Earth were surprised by how much their hosts knew about our planet: the dividing of land, disputes, wars – the list went on.

Meanwhile, the youngsters were checking out the various shelves of books. They were each given a small device that translated the unreadable titles into English, of a sort. Some words were mixed around, but they could work out what they were.

Mary found a case of historical books and was fascinated by how extensive it was. They were written by the ‘recorder’ and followed by their name. There were hundreds from various parts of Avalon. She

found a shelf on Camelot history. *I must check these out*, she thought to herself.

Owen found a section of fictional books and was surprised to see that they were comparable to books on Earth. There was even a section on science fiction, which he decided to keep from John until later – otherwise he would more than likely freak out.

Claire and Emily were engrossed in a section of books for children. Again, they were very much like those on Earth; the only difference they were from each of the planets.

The twins skipped passed most of the cases to find the educational books. They were engrossed in dictionaries, thesauruses and encyclopaedias. There was every language there, not only in the Albion Confederation but also from Earth. They gave each other their ‘we must check this’ and ‘how did they get these books’ looks. This amount of literature probably explained how they knew all the information about Earth.

John, his mind in overload, skipped from one area to another without really giving himself time to explore. Then he suddenly came to a stop. What caught his eye was a section of translated Shakespeare.

“Uh,” he mused, scanning the titles. “What is it?” asked Estrellita. “This!” he replied.

“We have read your Shakespeare,” the princess replied. That caught everyone’s attention.

“Really?” asked the twins.

Before she could reply, John picked up a small skull from one of the desks and launched into what his friends would call a ‘Shakespeare Dweeb-A-Thon’.

“To be, or not to be? That’s a stupid question. Alas Hamlet thou will never receive an answer for now willeth arrive the winter of our discontent.”

“Here he goes,” Owen said with a chuckle.

“Alas, poor Yorick,” he continued. “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears! How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child’.”

“So thou, Hamlet, rushed to free Romeo from the clutches of the evil seductress Juliet, but thou never saw ‘the green-ey’d monster which doth mock’. Thou should have realised that there are ‘more things in heaven and

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earth’,” he continued. “On arriving, your dream was shattered, if only for a moment by the dulcet tones of Juliet’s voice. ‘O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?’ Romeo, Romeo, get thy backside in here, right now! It’s your turn to do thy dishes. Romeo, however, had runneth because ‘the lady doth protest too much’.”

“Romeo and Juliet wasn’t like that,” objected the princess wagging a finger at him.

“Put that skull down before you break it,” his mum warned.

When everyone finally got past their surprise, it was the twins who spoke first.

“Since when have you known so many Shakespeare quotes?” Meg asked.

“You may not be as thick as we thought,” added Lottie.

