

Never Seen
Book One:
The Faeland Legends

Taylor Hunter



NeverSeen

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Dedication

To my grandma's grandma, who saw the unbelievable
with her own eyes.

To those who never stop believing in what they
can't see and what they can't know for certain.

To all the dreamers in the world, who contentedly stare into
space as they discover and recreate the universe as the rest of
the world could have *NeverSeen*.

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Foreword

Never let somebody tell you to get your head out of the clouds. When somebody tells you that, it usually means they're jealous of your creativity. Unless, of course, you're being irresponsible and not doing your chores. All I'm trying to say is, if you have a dream to write a book, make a movie, become the next Steve Jobs, or have the bestselling album on iTunes for five weeks in a row, don't let *anyone* tell you that you can't do it. *Because you can.* You can do anything if you really, truly want it. There's always that one thing that gives your soul the thrill nothing else can give you: the feeling that you can accomplish something that nobody else can accomplish, the sensation that there is a niche nobody but *you* can fill. Everyone is here for a reason. You just need to figure out *what that reason is.*

What are **YOU** here for?

Taylor Hunter

Prologue

My eyes flew open as I choked on thick, black smoke pouring in through my open window. I thrashed in my bed, desperately tangled in my sheets, finally crashing to the floor, my legs released from their sheeted prison. Adrenalized from both a gasp of fresh air and the ultimate peril, I sprang from the hard ground and cast myself at the door, fumbling for the latch keeping me from escape. My head caught up with me.

Click. Out the door and running. *Crack!* Flat on the floor, a broken board above me. Head pounding. Hot blood racing down my cheek. *Have to race now. For my life. Can't stop. Not now. Not now.*

Thick, stinging smoke. Couldn't see, eyes burning. *Crawl to the front door. Reach, reach for it.* The handle. *Pull it back.*

Flames lick greedily up the stair from below. People running, falling, screaming. Everywhere. Toxic smoke cloaks them. Me. Everything. Cloaked in death. Parents, children, old, young, strong, weak—all cloaked. *All going. All gone.* My heart shrieked with horror. *Where are mine?*

Mom was gone, I already knew. Dad? Probably, he would've been one of the first there. The hummers would've felt it coming and fled, maybe dead. *Ash? Ash! Ashlee was with me!* I turned from the blinding horror and clambered across the floor, choking and coughing. Stood up, flew at her door. Head pounding, fist pounding on the door. As if hearing myself from far away, I screamed "Ashlee! Ash! Open up!

Now!” I didn’t wait for an answer. My right heel would have a bruise for weeks if I lived.

The floor liked my face tonight. I cursed at the pain, “Troll-snot-owl-pellet-fingernail!” I struggled to stand. Was it me or the ground? One kept moving. I clawed at the wall for balance. Everything was too slow. I fought to keep consciousness as Ashlee’s small frame slid out from under the bed and grabbed my waist. We started down the hall. There was only one window large enough to get us out of the master bedroom.

Nobody home. I knew that. The flames called our names as they slunk closer, trying to tempt us away from our shattered lives. Ashlee countered my weight as I grabbed the stool by the desk and hurled it with what strength I had at the window. Glass shards showered like the rain outside, and we followed them, the massive Temple tree groaning the sound of smoky death as it fell away from us. The flames howled at our escape, left without their final prize. We fell.

The tree gave itself to the river, its life source and only companion in death. We fell as the smoke tried to claim us. We fell. I couldn’t breathe. Even the fresh air was naught more than poison. We fell as the air tried to wrap us in a cocoon of un-life, being the breath we had to have without giving us the ability to take it. We fell. I was drowning in smoky sleep, too exhausted to try to live. We fell. I heard voices calling. Hands were catching. Catching us.

The freezing, wet ground met my burning back. I gasped in pain and shock and then coughed and choked and gasped all over again uncontrollably. The hissing of a horrid, evil serpent filled my ears, then I felt it rumble through every fiber of my being as the tree collapsed into the river, spent of life save that of the fire viciously devouring it like a ravenous wild beast.

There was nothing but smoke. All was smoke. The ground. The sky. The people. All was smoke...all was smoke...allwassmokeallwassmoke.

All.

Was.

Smoke.

Ashlee was smoke. Everyone was smoke. I was smoke. I was ash. Ash was falling. Everywhere. Falling like a demon's snowstorm. Everybody was there and nobody was there. All was smoke and ash. All was silent. Silent death. I wasn't dead yet. I didn't know how. I didn't know why. I didn't know.

I strained to open my eyes to see what was left.

From the starless, dead sky, stared two evil, blood red eyes, cursing at my tiny, choking soul, watching me die, wishing I was dead already. I thought I saw my rescuer, my mother, coming for us, to save us from the evil above, guarding us with her angelically beautiful silhouette, as the darkness closed about me, like a cool, wet cloth on a sweaty summer night. I passed out of knowledge and time.

Taylor Hunter

Chapter One: Good Morning

I awoke with a start, panting into my wet pillow. My sheets were in the worst shape I'd seen in ages, and that was saying something. I was drenched in sweat and very cold, despite the gentle touch of just-cool-enough, fresh, spring air coming in through my bedroom window. It wasn't yet dawn. Threads of cool, pale moonlight drifted through my curtain, unconcerned with my current mental state. I sat on the edge of my bed, shivering uncontrollably and hyperventilating. Well practiced in the art of breath control, I forced myself to slow down, altering my short, shallow gasps into elongated, enriching sighs. I stared at my sorry reflection in the portrait mirror on my dresser, which was as frustrated and disturbed as I was. Yet another night with an hour short on sleep. I had to get this out of my head.

My secret notebook emerged for the fourth night in a row from my dresser and was opened up embarrassingly on my desk in front of the window. My window was the perfect size for me. It had space enough to see the skyline but was small enough that you could go quite unnoticed behind the curtains as you contemplated the deep mysteries of the ages. But not tonight or for many past nights for me. I brushed last night's drawings of leaves and birds and creatures of lore and magic to the side and poured my horrifying nightmare onto the rapidly decreasing supply of blank sheets in my notebook.

Every detail, every sensation was stripped to the bone and laid bare on those precious pages of my uppermost privacy and secrecy.

This notebook cradled my sanity. It was my dreamlog. It contained every strange dream I could recall; as such, it was volume twelve of my dreamlog series. Yeah, I had weird dreams a lot. But they weren't just weird. They were much more than that. And that was why this dream in particular was that much more terrifying to my sensitive little heart.

I didn't tell anyone about my secret notebook of dreams, with the exception of my best friend, Sameela O'Klurn. We looked out for each other and kept each other's secrets. She was the only person who knew I had a history of night terrors, but even then, I told her as little as I could. Sometimes the less you know, the safer you'll be if someone starts snooping.

Besides her, I had never told anyone else why I looked so tired and acted so jumpy sometimes, but I knew Ashleeka had figured me out a long time ago. Ashleeka is my seven-year-old sister, but she has wisdom beyond her years. She has an uncanny ability of perception and philosophy that blows my mind every day. But hardly anyone knows about it because she rarely speaks. To anyone—even her parents. She mostly talks to me and that's it. My name is Emmaline O'Meern.

By the time I shut my dreamlog an hour later, the sun was poking its sharp little nose into my window. Time's up. Gotta get ready for a new day. The dreamlog was tucked away into its place of secret misery and fear to eat away at my subconscious, again, all day.

Ah, just another day in the life.

I prepared my mind for the coming semi-chaos as I washed my sweaty face, combed my long, gnarly hair into a thick, gorgeous ponytail, and dressed up in my favorite indigo jumpsuit and turquoise-magenta-flowered sundress. After I packed my school things in my woven-leaf sack, I opened my door and headed for the kitchen down the hall to make

breakfast for Mom and Ashleeka. Mom was due to have a baby any day, so we pitched in with everything from meals to laundry.

I was steadily chopping up various fruits for Mom when Ashleeka came in, guiding Mom's enormous, rotund form to a comfortable chair in the living room. Mom hobbled like an elder, clutching a cane for support. I knew I had been big and so had Ashlee, but never that big. Some people were thinking twins. Ashlee didn't think so. I trusted her more than the nurses. That may seem stupid, but if you knew what I knew, you wouldn't second-guess Ash for half a minute.

Ashlee skipped her way into the kitchen as I finished cutting the fruits and loaded them up on Mom's favorite plate: a smooth, pink stone she and Dad had found on their honeymoon by the river. Ashleeka took it to Mom for me as I started in on our lunches. I glanced at Mom to see how she was doing. She looked pale and tired as she quietly chewed on the fresh fruit. I couldn't remember the last time she could go someplace without help. All of us were hoping the baby would arrive soon to give Mom a break.

"Bats!" I swore as I ran my finger under the faucet. My attention had strayed too far, and my finger had a close encounter with a sharp blade. I struggled to stay cool and collected while I bandaged my hand by focusing on the birds and bees flying around outside the kitchen window. *Buzz-buzz* said a bee, looking at me. Sometimes I liked them, sometimes they scared me. Ashleeka finished packing our lunches before I even realized what she was doing. I was distracted by what she was saying.

"Hey Eme," she stated in an authoritative whisper. "Mom needs to be taken to Skyglass before school. She'll need all the restful treatment she can get before her labor starts at seven tonight." Ashlee stopped in front of me and gave me a look like I wasn't paying attention. "Wait...what?" I sputtered.

"Hello? Didn't you hear anything I said? We need to get Mom ready to go to Skyglass. Go and pack some clothes and

blankets for her, will you? Relax!” She shushed me before I could express my distress. “We don’t have to get her there—that’s taken care of. Just get some of her favorite things, okay?”

No, not okay, I thought as my heart threatened to pound itself out of my chest. Ashleeka sighed, took my hand, and led me to Mom’s room. She stopped and stared at me squarely as a mother to a disobedient child. Her dark-blue eyes were laser focused on my deep hazel eyes. “Look, I’ll do the packing. You just get her coat and act surprised when someone knocks on the front door,” she instructed me. Before I could ask who would come knocking, somebody did. I ran to the door.

A messenger was waiting on the other side, holding a scroll. “Is Mrs. Sonyamay O’Meern present?” he inquired with the utmost politeness. Flustered, I found myself opening my mouth with nothing coming out. I merely pointed over to where Mom sat, barely awake on the comforter chair. He tipped his hat politely, saying, “I’ve been sent from Skyglass, ma’am. I have instructions to bring you back for prelabor care this morning. If you’d just get into the carriage, please.”

I stood, shell-shocked, gaping like some dummy who had just heard he’d won a year’s worth of free labor in his fields. “Uh...yeah. Sure. Um, just a minute,” I mumbled as Ash came in with a small pack of clothes and helped Mom up from her chair. She hobbled slowly out the door, doing everything she could to not lose her balance. Honestly, it was torture to watch my mother go through that and be helpless to her needs. I remembered her coat and got it for her. It was dandelion yellow, her favorite color.

“Bye, Mom. I love you,” I called as the messenger shut the carriage door and hopped into the driver’s seat. She gave me something wonderful: a small smile, the likes of which I hadn’t seen for far too long. The carriage flew off into openness beyond the tree. I stood for a minute, praying for her. Something started humming erratically by my head.

“Hey there, buddy, you ready for school?” I asked Frankle, one of my hummers. Studbum, my other one, zipped

around my head and hovered in front of me to say, “Well, yeah, only since yesterday!” Ashlee pulled out our coats and sacks and locked the front door as I harnessed my hummingbirds. I helped Ash get her coat on as she harnessed Doolee and Buzzle, her hummers. We mounted and harnessed onto our leaf-sleds as we swung our packs on and gave a whistle.

Off we went!

Despite the fun I had being flown to and fro by hummers, I still couldn't wait for the final flying test. It was just two days from now, and I was nervous and excited all at once. Until you were fifteen, you had to travel by carriage or hummer, until your wings were large and strong enough to carry your weight. To finally fly anywhere, that was every teen faery's goal. Freedom can't always be bought or sold, nor should it. Bondage is one thing that the faery kingdom cannot stand. It is better to die trying to be free than to remain in captivity for all time.

Racing along the inside of the tree, we barreled toward the large knot-hole entrance. Sliding and bumping down the branch, I prepared for the Plunge. No more branch. Down we went. Very fast. But I feared not. The air supported me as it always did, and the hummers guided my course. Upward. We soared up and up and up through the fresh air, as we saw life stirring in the small stores and faeries emerging from their sleepy, blanketed world. Then we surged up through the branches of the massive habit-trees towards the wide, clouded sleepiness of the sky ...and then all turned as smooth as ice on a winter-land pond.

It was later than it appeared, I knew. The many clouds snuggling on the horizon were snuffing the sunlight, teasing us to turn back and crawl into our nice warm beds. The breeze, crisp and cool, drifted through the trees below us, playing the music of gentle waterfalls on the instruments of the new green leaves almost finished budding. The true water lay trickling far below, splashing and rolling like a majestic chaos of faeries in a dancing ring. The thrumming of our

hummers' wings, the seeming chorus of a quiet, contented world surrounded me like a cozy blanket. I didn't want to, but I closed my eyes, just for a moment. Just a moment.

No, no, no, I pleaded as the ghostly images threatened to emerge from the cage of my subconscious, those horrid phantoms that were cursed to torment my mind. *No, please, not now! Not when I've just started to forget! Wake up! Wake up, Emmaline, dang it! Don't let this get out of control. WAKE UP!*

Someone else did it for me.

"Hey-ey, Emmaline! You're really cruising!" screeched a voice that, unfortunately, was very familiar to me. My eyelids retracted as my blood started boiling. Shadela Glump, my arch enemy for, well, as long as I can remember, darted wildly above me, like a hawk waiting to dive for its prey. Her harsh red-and-brown-speckled wings beat with the pride of a month's head start as she sneered at me, taunting, "Hey-ey, Emmaline! You dreamin' again? Huh? Dreamin' like a little bay-bee!"

It took everything I had to focus my energy forward as I recontemplated for the umpteenth time what the consequences would be if I played out my fantasies of revenge. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

"Hey-ey, little Emmaline! Baby Emma! You still dreamin'? You dreamin' about when you'll be all growed up enough to use those pathetic little baby wings of yours? Huh? When's the baby's special day?" she hissed. I could feel those black, raven eyes of hers boring into my skull, waiting to scavenge off my anger and despair.

"Little baby! You know what I think? I think it's time for you to WAKE UP!"

She snapped her wings together and dove at me with the speed of a falcon. I waited and at the perfect millisecond, I vanished.

Shadela fluttered where I should have been. Far from being the smartest at school, she looked around below her as if I'd also dived, instead of rolling away in a sideways barrel, and then up above her as a trade of places. Which is exactly

what I'd done.

She must have heard my sarcastic condolences for her intelligence: she snapped her head up at me and snarled like a wolf. "Ooh, you're a bad little baby! Time for a time-out!" she growled. Shadela shot up like a burst of fire, hitting my leaf-sled and knocking me off balance and off the sled. She cackled hysterically as I careened off course, helplessly unprepared, and sped out of control towards the Willow-Tree Market.

My heart pounded in my throat from the adrenaline rush. I couldn't get back up. Time was running out as I flew sideways towards the massive tree. My wings weren't ready for this. I tried to shift my weight. Almost...there...

It happened. I got upright a second before I burst into a chaos of foods and goods and astonished faeries. Faeries. Baskets. Branches. Leaves. Everything. Over. Under. Right. Left. Over over under left over right under roll. Basket faery branch basket basket faeries branch. On and on. Here and there and everywhere. Confusion. Alarm. Anger. Surrounding me. For a few seconds, I saw the sky calling. The drooping branches flew back as I exploded from the accidental chaos behind me. It was over. I was through. I was safe.

I spread my wings out, gliding, and slowed my heart rate. *Breathe*. In and out. In and out. *Slow down*. I found my sled and reharnessed. I let my hummers take control again. Peace came to me. Peace I could find in very few places and certainly not at night when I slept. My eyelids closed, but I knew I wouldn't sleep. I lay out on my leaf and slipped into a state of semiconsciousness, where I could dream of the beauty in the sky I saw without the intrusion of my demons. Knowledge let me by. I drifted on the current of nothingness. Nothing at all.

The little baby dreamt.

Chapter Two: Skyglass

I was aware of many things surrounding me before I saw them. I was lying on a soft, cushy blanket of lamb's ear petals, wafting their light, milky scent as their soft hairs caressed my face. Strands of golden sunlight weaved across me, gently warming my tired form. Water trickled nearby in a small fountain for washing and drinking in peace. A kind breeze played with my auburn hair and greeted me with the faint smell of...well, everything lovely. I finally forced my eyes open.

I sat up dreamily on my bed. The nonchalant waving of tree branches far above came and went in my window. My pack was perched precariously on the edge of my chair at my desk. Except it wasn't my desk, or my chair, or my bed, or even my room. It wasn't my house or my habit-tree, either. I was on one of the highest levels of Skyglass, our sacred healing place in the largest tree known to our kind. It was an elder tree planted in NeverSeen by the First Ones, after they were made by the Great One.

I could feel the life of that ancient tree pulsing through every fiber of wood inside of it, the life of everyone who was and ever would be there: children, elders, fathers, mothers. And Mom, finally resting and waiting with love for the baby to come. Love. It wrapped itself around me in the fair breeze pouring in, the branches stretching their way to the High Sky,

and the fountain of water waiting to quench the thirst of the poor, tired faery that stayed there. It was the perfect environment for rest and recovery. It had been a long day.

I attempted to recall what had occurred in my day by sweeping away the fog covering the harbor of my memory. It faded in the sort of way that you don't quite realize, until everything is crystal clear, and the water is smooth as glass as the little boat of the memory you desire to reexplore drifts closer to shore, and you peer inside to find the thing you seek.



I'd been semiconscious for about ten minutes before I heard the familiar rumble of sounds that told me I was nearing school. I pulled myself up and stretched and saw Ashleeka tailing me from some distance. Guess she wanted to see, from a safe distance, how I handled Shadela today. We waved good-bye as we split off for our different levels: younger faeries have class in the lower levels and work their way up to the top as they progress each year. She circled down to level two, far ahead of other kids her age at Sunray Elementary, as I circled up to level ten of Moonbeam Academy. It was my final year of schooling before I chose whom I would be apprenticed to. A lot of pressure was on us final-years to figure out what our goal in life was to be, and sometimes it kept us up at night. But, hey, I was already used to that, so what difference did that make?

I came in for a landing, and being well practiced, I was off my sled and walking before we stopped moving. I unhitched Frankle and Studbum to go off and replenish their sugar supply and hung up my leaf-sled on one of the hooks on the wall. After taking a deep breath, I walked out into the great hall and started my school day.

It had started well enough, with Ancient Runes being more fascinating—as always—than I could imagine. Scientific Studies were exciting, as we learned about the revolutionary

breakthroughs of our ancestors, and Inventions Workshop thrilled me as I assembled the ideas of my own creation. My trouble started, however, in Advanced Mathematics, as we were taking detailed notes on the subject of Number Sequence Study and the significance of certain sequential connections.

I'd just been massaging my sore hand after completing the extensive theorems from the board on what becomes of an invisible quantity of possibilities, when our instructor, Mrs. Plumbottle, asked us if anyone knew what an extensional was. "Anything at all?" she asked again as her cat-like gaze swept back and forth over our stupefied faces. Even I hadn't heard of an extensional.

"Well, *dub*," blurted somebody towards the back, "it's a cross of exceptional and extension! *Everyone* knows that!" I didn't have to turn around to know it was Waximitt St'ail, the biggest, most pompous, loud-mouthed clown I had ever known. I had the unfortunate schedule of having him in several classes. All the glitzy, short-skirted, caterpillar-eyelashed, popular girls practically worshiped him as they complimented him on his "vastly stupendous intelligence." The other troublemaker guys were snickering at Mrs. Plumbottle as she stared, extremely unimpressed, at the mess of kids hanging around together defiantly in the back of the room. She stared at the space above their heads for a minute.

"You know what I was just thinking?" she mused out loud. I knew something great was coming. "I think it would be so much easier to teach if all you kids couldn't talk," she continued. Mrs. Plumbottle looked around at all of us. "Wouldn't that be nice?" she inquired to the roomful of confused faces. "Don't you think that would be nice, Miss Emmaline?" she asked me. "I think some of you would have a better chance of graduating if you stopped talking and started learning," she added, smiling as I laughed quietly to myself. I got her humor. The other kids just sat there, scowling.

Mrs. Plumbottle continued with the lesson. "An

extensional,” she began, “is anything that is perceived by our senses that can be translated to another. But more specifically,” she added, “a mathematical extensional is one which can be represented by a mathematical formula or number sequence. Can anyone think of the most common one we know?” Mrs. Plumbottle asked the class.

“Is it the number pi?” I asked her.

“Right you are, Miss Emmaline!” she congratulated, as the rest of the class either groaned or snickered behind me. Someone behind me whispered, “Yeah, Emmaline, *you* tell us what it is! We’re too dumb to figure it out!” “You sure know everything! I wish *I* were as smart as you!” someone else taunted. I did my best to ignore them and stay focused on Mrs. Plumbottle’s review of what pi stood for, being the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter.

For the next half hour, Mrs. Plumbottle trained us how to solve simple extensionals. Most of us struggled for a while, but after she walked me through a more difficult problem, something clicked in my head. It finally made sense to me. Through that single complex formula, a reasonable answer could be established by means of quantiguminalistid configuration! I was nearly floating from excitement.

I was in the process of trying an extensional of my own making when Mrs. Plumbottle stopped us for a minute. She said we were going to do an experiment with an object of hers. I was deeply curious about it.

Mrs. Plumbottle pulled out a bizarre nut-like thing and showed it to the class. “This is a great little example of an extensional translation. I’ll tell you how it works,” she began as she set it on the table in front of her. “I’m going to try to smash this nut, and I want any of you to tell me if you think you know how it is internally structured in extensional form. Can you do that for me?” she asked of us. Most people sat back in their chairs, already accepting defeat, but I sat forward to get a closer look at it. We braced ourselves as Mrs. Plumbottle pulled a large mallet out of a drawer and brought it above her head.

I saw a wave of light explode out of the nut towards me. A roaring wind engulfed me as I tried to block out the extreme brightness that was trying to...I didn't know what. Every cell in my body felt like it was being separated from me, like I was being dissolved. I pushed as hard as I could away from the intensity drowning my senses. I started coming back, but everything was so blurry. My vision wouldn't focus. The grinding of wheels surrounded my ears. Then everything shifted into something comprehensible: a math and science room, filled with gaping students, blown away at the unbelievable event they had just witnessed.

"Ow," I moaned as I pulled myself off of the floor and back into my chair. Suddenly I realized nearly everyone was laughing and joking. About me. Apparently I was the only one to see anything and definitely the only one to fly backwards out of her chair and onto the hard floor. My cheeks turned red as the usually sneaky torments transformed into full-on catcalls and owl screeches. They pierced my soul, making me feel ashamed, despite having done no wrong. My tears, which I couldn't say if they were from embarrassment or the pain in my elbows, wings, and head, were just about to spill over.

"All right, that's *enough!*" yelled Mrs. Plumbottle, overcoming the jeering crowd of my class-"mates" by a level of volume exponentially higher than theirs combined. She gave them The Stare of the Accused. They fell silent, but their triumph was still very evident on their not-so-concealed, smirking faces.

"Are you alright, Miss Emmaline?"

I nodded. She could tell I lied.

"Any last questions before class is over?" She searched our faces for "a question mark on our foreheads," as she says. Nobody said zip.

Those few seconds felt like eternity before the bell rang. I packed my books into my bag as quickly as I could. People kept bumping purposely into the back of my chair on their way out, muttering their final stinging comments before they

went. I tried to stand up to leave, but Waximitt flapped his wings in my face, snarling, “Sid down, ya smarty-pants, and git yer head on straight.” I had no choice until they were all gone, heading to fill their growling bellies with all manner of poor foods and sweets optional at lunch time.

I pushed my chair back to the table a bit harder than I intended to. I mumbled an apology as I headed for the door. “Miss Emmaline,” spoke Mrs. Plumbottle. I halted in my tracks.

“Yes?”

“Would you do me a favor, please?”

“Um...what is it?”

“Could you draw what you saw on the board, please? It would mean a great deal to me,” she explained as she sat down at her desk in the back corner. “I’m doing some research,” she continued, “about the number of people who can translate extensionals naturally in their head. Don’t worry, it’s not a test,” she replied to the nervous expression on my face. “I just want to see what you can do. Alright? Good!” she concluded cheerfully, as she ruffled through some test papers from yesterday.

I went to the front and drew everything I could remember, starting with a giant swirling figure on the left. *That’s strange*, I thought as I wrote the rest on the board. *I don’t actually remember seeing any of this in the wave of light. Maybe that’s part of the translation process*, I wondered as I finished my masterpiece. I put down the pen and stepped back.

Guinolia Nut = 8’s approximate quantical configimagine, factoring quirbal plunification

I picked my bag up off the floor and turned to see Mrs. Plumbottle gaping at what I had covered her board with. Looking back and forth between her and the board, I grew concerned.

“Is everything alright, Mrs. Plumbottle?”

She had a strange look in her eyes, like she couldn’t—or

didn't—want to comprehend what she was seeing. “What?” she asked me, perplexed. “Oh, no, everything's fine...you did very well, I must say. You're excused now, Miss Emmaline,” she answered, acting like nothing had happened at all.

I left the room with far graver concerns than being worried about people laughing in my face for the next week. *First that dream, and then Mom and Ashlee, and now this?* I interrogated myself as I headed for the lunchroom. *What in God's name is going on around here?*

I sat in virtual silence for the lunch hour as my lunch buddies joked around about whatever new funny thing they heard through the grapevine. Completely engrossed in my neural complexities, I beat my memory to death as I recapped what had happened in the past couple of hours. The dream of the burning tree. Ashlee predicting Mom's delivery being today. And now this incident in Advanced Math. Why hadn't anyone else seen anything? I mean, I knew it was unlikely, but seriously, was it just me? And why did Mrs. Plumbottle react so strongly to my translation? I knew at that moment she was hiding something from me, but I didn't know then how unbelievably bigger the scale was of that something and how greatly it would affect the rest of my life.



And then the day got even better.

Stupid me, I cursed at myself as I sprinted down the hall. In my extreme self-absorption, I'd somehow managed to completely miss the first bell and in about ten seconds would have my first “late” to one of my favorite classes, Astronomical Phenomena. If there was one thing I hated about school more than the kids out to make my life a living furnace, it was being late.

Come on, move faster, you dumb, brainless toadfish! I slapped at myself as halfway down the hall, the tardy bell rang, vibrating my delicate soul. *Troll snot!* I swore. *Sorry, God*, I repented, as I gave it my all to reach the stairs before the bell finished

echoing. I'd be late for sure. There was no way to get up those steep, winding stairs in a second, even if I flew, which I couldn't. Not before the test. If I tried now, I would never fly. Until I got angel wings, anyway.

I felt a sudden burst of power like no adrenaline I'd felt before as I leapt up the stairs in the terrible silence. The amber glow of the new spring sun flooded my vision as I entered the tall-windowed stair tower...

And then there was nothing.

What in Skyglass..., I thought as I looked around, startled out of my skin. I was surrounded by...outer space? *Geez*, I half joked, *this is like that weird show The Midnight Realm that the guys were making fun of*. But it wasn't. It was much weirder than that.

I was enveloped in darkness, the darkness of outer-world areas. And stars. There were stars everywhere! Blue stars, red stars, green stars, purple stars, orange stars. Any color you could name, there were a hundred stars for it. But there were no people. Where was everyone? I was at school; I should've seen people, right?

Wrong.

A terrible idea entered my mind.

What if all those stars *were* the people?

Then I realized my chest was glowing.

White.

I was a white star.

A storm filled my head as those hundreds of thousands of stars of people jumped abruptly. Ringing. I heard ringing. *Outside* my head? In the stairwell. I was at the top. In the doorway. At my seat. The tardy bell's echoes finally stopped.

What on God's green earth just happened to me?

I sat shell-shocked. Nobody noticed or cared. I always stared off blankly in *Astronomical Phenomena*. I loved it. But not that day, nor that moment. There was no explanation I could find, sifting through the pages of my book when the teacher didn't look, as she taught things I'd read many times already, of what had just occurred in the stairwell. Nothing.

Nothing at all. In a class dutifully dedicated to the oddities of the outer worlds, there was nothing remotely close to describing the event I alone had experienced. Nothing.

Then I forgot what I was looking for at all. That's what tends to happen when a terror of your subconscious jumps into reality.

I couldn't stop looking at the caption below a horrid picture:

Double Reaper's Moon. Appearance of blood-staining is due to an extremely rare planet-satellite alignment, in which the atmosphere of the planet bends sunlight in a way that only red light is reflected off the satellites. Superstitious peoples believe that the devil uses these forces of poor lighting as an opportunity to walk amongst the weak, bringing devastation to any he may pass; as such, catastrophic events can be either caused or inspired by this haunting and widely believed legend.

The teacher asked me if I wished to share something, since I'd been obviously not paying attention to the lesson at hand. She seemed surprised that I responded.

"No, ma'am. Just found something I didn't expect."

Chapter Three: Five Plus Six

“G^{ah!}”
I panted as the banging continued on my door.
“Who’s it?” I yelled.

“Me, dummy. Who else?”

Ashleeka opened my door and walked in with an air of impatience. “You were yelling random stuff, and you were disturbing the peace,” she accused me.

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yuh-huh,” she retorted defiantly as she clambered onto my bed and threw a pillow at my face. I growled. Time for a new strategy.

“Whose peace? I was the one sleeping.”

“My peace. I was the one studying. But I’m done now.”

I glared at her. “So why the heck d’ja wake me up for?”

Ashleeka stared at me. Then she hopped off my bed and walked out the door. She was so weird. And annoying. And wonderful. Siblings are complicated.

My back popped a zillion times as I stretched out and batted my stiff wings. My left foot had fallen asleep. I slumped my way out of the room as noises came from the hallway.

“Ash, what are you doing?”

“Nailing this board back into the ceiling where it belongs. It’s loose. So unless you want a permanent addition

to your facial features, I'm going to keep nailing."

"Whatever," I started, but then I remembered something. Something far off in time and distance, which had finally escaped my mind as I slept. Dang it.

"How long has that board been loose?"

"How should I know? You're the super-genius who notices everything. You tell me, hotshot," she retorted as she continued whacking the heck out of the board above her head. The chair she stood on wobbled as she hammered.

"Hey!" I argued, "Since when do you hate my guts and call me names?"

She stopped and looked at me.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Deal?"

I said nothing.

"My answer to your previous question, about why I woke you up, is only half true. I woke you because you were yelling, yes, but also because I received a message that all sled riders were to report to the training room at four. So," she paused to check her watch as I grabbed my jacket and shoes, "you have approximately fifteen minutes to get there. I suggest you hurry."

"Gee, thanks," I grumbled. "I sure couldn't have figured *that* out." I grabbed my harness and goggles.

I got to the training room five minutes after four, which everyone knew was ten minutes too late. Coach Wachler was very strict about tardiness, so I was astounded to find that the rest of my fellow sledders were waiting outside the door with great annoyance on their faces. "Why the heck won't he let us in? Geez," someone asked. Others seemed quite unconcerned about their fate at the hands of the coach and broke regulation by sitting on the floor, attempting to go to sleep. Wished I could've done the same, but I could never let myself fall asleep anywhere outside the house. Not me. It was too dangerous.

Suddenly loud footsteps sounded behind the door. The guilty sleepers leapt from the floor and tried to look vigilant as the doorway opened and was filled with the stature of an

enormous man. “Good afternoon, Coach Wachler,” we all chorused together, praying for mercy. From what we weren’t completely sure.

Coach Wachler had the gaze of a ravenous hawk, or an executioner, whichever you preferred. It felt like he could burn a hole straight through you if he wanted to. There were a few myths passed around that anybody who’d ever stood up to him mysteriously disappeared and was found months later rotting in the deep, dank dungeons of the old mining spaces, but nobody really believed them. At least, not in the sort of way that you think is true, but wonder about it, nonetheless, because it’s so creepy. Ugh.

We filed silently into the training room. Everything had been removed, which was strange for us. The room felt too big, too open without all the equipment: high-up obstacle courses, weights, and fans to strengthen our wings and increase mobility. I wondered what, then, was the purpose for being here. I soon found out.

“All right then!” boomed Coach Wachler. “Today you are not training in here; today you are not even training! Today,” he paused for effect. “You had better hope you are ready, because the High Order has decided to hold the Flight Test early!” An overall groan of dismay rushed over us. “Why?” I dared to ask. Coach turned his penetrating stare to me. A few buddies of mine and I once made a joke that he wasn’t really a faery, but a metal frame with an outer shell of man. Like in the movie *The Conforminator*.

The High Order, he told me, had chosen to have the test early because the Watchers of Starglass, the astronomical observatory, had seen a great storm coming our way and had deemed it necessary to test all sledders early for their own protection. “Who knows,” he said, as he continued striding in front of his legion, “of what that storm may bring? There are many who say it comes not as worldly weather, but from some kind of conjuror.” He watched us for reactions. Nobody took him seriously, and most braved something of a smile. Coach hinted a smile back. *He wasn’t really that bad, I*

thought then, *not really at all.*

We had ten minutes to warm up before learning which course we'd be tested on, so we set to doing flying exercises. I found myself to be much stronger than I remembered and more graceful. But what I needed most was speed. Tests were timed and you had to make it before the bell. I wasn't sure if I could. But I had to. I had to pass. I had to.

Flying without a sled is sometimes harder than with it. You don't have anything to kneel on or to rest on. You always, always, always have to be alert and be quick. I sure wasn't the best, but I wasn't too bad, either. I hoped my extra sessions with Dad would pay off. *Will anyone be watching?* I wondered. I hoped not. Too much pressure.

I was stretching out one last time, which I noticed many failed to do, when the coach returned and yelled to get down on the floor again and move it. The others panted and groaned as they ran back to the harness room. I knew they'd regret not stretching. They'd pay for it, one way or another.

Coach led us out into the bright, spring sunlight and cool breeze. We followed obediently on our sleds, all hoping it would be their strongest course they would be tested on, not that one or that one, and please not that one, above all! I drifted along, trying to be unconcerned. *Relax, I told myself, relax. Stay loose. Stay ready. We'll find out soon enough.*

My eyes closed.

I saw a storm on the horizon, dark clouds roiling with thunder. It moved faster than the wind can blow, and already it was overhead. Over Skyglass. *No, no, not again!* Rain fell like spears of ice, stinging like hornets in a rage. Thunder plotted destruction over the great tree. *Make it stop, dang it, make it stop! I don't want this!* Flashes of lightning ripped apart between clouds. *Leave, run! Get away while you can! Don't stay to die!* Light like the sun jumped down from the horrid storm, piercing the roots of Skyglass.

Fire blazed uncontrollably like a waterfall pouring over a cliffside. *No! Ashlee, run! Mom, Dad, everyone! Get out! Run, run, run! You'll burn! Noooooo!* There was no distinguishing between

smoke and storm now. All was burning. Flames roared. Every tree, every bush, everyone. Burning. Burning as they flew out windows, like the stones exploding from a volcano. Yes, a volcano...full of heat and fire. A nice home for...what would live in a volcano? Something evil...yes...something scaly...a...a...dragon? A great black creature swept across the smoke-storm, glinting in the firelight of the death it had caused. Wind. More wind. Trying to blow me over. It dove at me, with its sharp, sword-like teeth, calling me to be gnawed on like a toy. I tried to get back...

The river was only a foot below my face when I caught myself. *Don't panic, don't panic*, I told myself, trying to flap fast enough to get up onto my sled again. The water rushed by so fast. *If I just gave up*, I calculated, *I would be swept away and nobody would even realize I was gone for hours...nor would they really care. Just think, Emmaline. No more nightmares, no more bullies, no more pressure...just peace. Forever...*

But not today.

I got back on the sled, wishing the sunlight would stop me from trembling. The mist from the river was cold from the runoff of melting snow. The breeze didn't help much either. But I was there. *And that's what matters*, I thought.

When I rejoined the group, I found myself in an eerily familiar shadow. Panic was thick enough to cut like cheese. The test course was, of course, to be set in the most complex branches and twigs...of the Willow-Tree Market. Talk about accidental *déjà vu*.

The Willow trial run was the most perilous of all the courses. Everyone knew that. Those brave or dumb enough to try it wiped out in seconds with a bloody nose or a busted arm or worse. Records said only one person had ever made it through successfully. *Ever*.

Coach said that the Willow course was for those who wished to pass at the top of the class with highest marks. If they made it through and if they made it in time. The record was 39.78 seconds. *Eesh*. Even I couldn't make it that quick...right? Then I flashed back to the morning. Shadela's

shove. My panicked maneuvers. Making it through. Unscathed. Maybe...just maybe I could!

I volunteered right as Coach was about to send us all off to an easier run. Grumbles, then taunts of being a showoff surged through the group hovering above the rushing waters. Coach gave me an eye of doubtful surprise but asked me to get ready anyway. "You'll have three chances to beat the required time of 45 seconds. If you make it and wish to try for a better time, you may do so. Are you set?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ready," he started.

I unhooked myself from my sled. My hummers sped out from underneath me. I breathed deeply. *Focus. Breathe. Focus. There is nothing but the tree. There is nothing but what is before you.* I practiced what my father had trained me to do. To focus.

"Set!"

There is nothing but the tree. You are alone. Alone in the world with a single tree. That is all that matters. That tree. Stay relaxed, stay focused, and never take your eyes off the tree. Focus. You are alone, with God as witness. With the tree, the only tree in the world, waiting for you to fly its course. You are focused. You are ready. God is watching.

"Go!"

I shot towards the tree. The leafy, green branches parted as I reached them. I followed what I had done that morning. Over. Under. Right. Left. Over over under left over right under roll. Left over under right turn twist under over roll twist glide. On and on. Here and there and everywhere. Branches and wind and leaves surrounding me. For a few seconds that felt like an eternity. I saw the sky calling me home. The light strands drew back like a majestic curtain as I careened out of the maze behind me. It was over. I was through. I was done.

But had I passed?

I slowed, finding my way back to Coach. His expression was beyond me.

"Coach?"

He kept looking from me to the timer he was holding. If he was surprised, he hid it very well. Or not well at all. His face was blank as a white canvas waiting to be painted.

“Coach Wachler? Did I pass?”

I felt panic bursting out of my chest as he wordlessly handed over the timer. I nearly exploded in astonishment.

32.67 seconds. Nobody'd beaten the record. Ever. It was more than extraordinary. It was dangerously close to miraculous.

“Congratulations, Miss Emma,” said Coach Wachler without conviction, as normal. “You may stay to watch or leave early.”

“Thank you, sir,” I answered halfheartedly, staring at the faces of the others. They were beyond disgusted.

I didn't even know how I did it. I wasn't the best. Surely someone else could have done it, too? I was saddened by the lack of anyone else even giving it a shot. *Please, I thought, please won't somebody else try? I didn't mean to hurt anybody. I just...can't help it.*

The class dispersed toward the regular trial run in shame and anger. They whispered things, glanced back at me. In hatred.

I'm...sorry...I guess...but I didn't do anything wrong! Why should I have to feel sorry for people when they're the ones blaming me for what they can't do? I was so confused. And angry. At them being angry. At me.

I left early.

I pecked away in the archery grounds later after dinner to try to sort things out. I was surprised the Temple even had archery grounds, given it was dedicated solely to worship and healing. *Whack!* Eh. Another inner circle. I'd had better days. And I would have worse nights.

The archery grounds had both field and wooded sections, depending on what you were concentrating on. Now, I just wanted to hit stuff. *Whack.* Middle circle. *Oy.* Keep trying, Dad would say keep trying. Except he wasn't there. He was holding Mom's hand, as the first contractions

were starting. *Whack*. Wrong circle. Poop. *A boy or a girl*, I wondered. *Did Dad want a boy?* I didn't know. I had never really thought of asking him. *Whack*. Inner circle. Better. I was surprised when Ash was born, but even Ash was surprised at the idea of a third O'Meern child. *Whack*.

Bull's-eye.

"Nice shot," someone said. I knew that voice.

"Hey, Sam."

Sameela O'Klurn was my best friend. We didn't see each other much, but that didn't matter. We were buddies. And that wouldn't change. She was wearing a favorite blue outfit of hers: tie-dye shirt, sea-blue pants. She wanted to study ocean life. If we'd ever get to the ocean. She had her brother with her. He adored me.

"Hi, Raven. How ya doin', buddy?"

"Good." He bugged his eyes up at me. His name wasn't Raven, it was Yadravn. Raven was just a nickname we'd made for him. Raven was eleven; Sameela was fourteen. He pulled a mutated contraption from his pocket composed of several seeds, twigs, and rocks, and tried to explain to me his marvelous invention. "See, Em-ma-line, this is where the, the rocks, uh, go, and uh, this, this is where the, uh, you pull back the, um, holder things, and this is where you, um, release it to make them fly." He was showing me his latest design for an improved trebuchet or catapult or whatever. I couldn't follow his meaning half the time, but he loved telling me anyway. Heh.

"Heard how you did on the Flying Test," Sameela broke in when Raven was persuaded that I thought his idea was awesome. I grimaced. "Yeah..." I trailed off. We watched Raven load his catapult-thing with some pebbles from the ground.

"I don't get why nobody else tried. It couldn't have been that impossible if you pulled it off," she said, trying to get me to say what I thought. I didn't know how much to tell her, so I just told her about my encounter with Shadela earlier that day. She still wouldn't accept my suggestion that Shadela

caused me to cheat. “But Emma,” she said, “it’s not like you knew that was the test route. You just went that way by accident!”

A chaotic sound of thumps diverted our attention. Raven had used my target as his own. Six little stones winked at us with dampness from the same marshmallow-like substance that my arrows were stuck in. He pumped his tiny fist victoriously as he ran over to pull them out. Five arrows. Six stones.

Eleven years of haunting dreams.

“Yeah,” I protested, “but why me? Why am I the only one who tried, and it just so happened that I had done that route once before in the same day?” I attempted with desperation to hold back the pulsing tears that wanted to spill out of my eyes. “Why?” I sat down on the ground, emotionally drained. All I could do was stare at my feet, my bow heavy and useless in my limp hands.

Sam, Raven, and I just sat for a while, listening to the peaceful quiet of the water in the stream nearby. To the breeze coming in from the windows. To the—

Thunder.

A storm was coming.

I remembered the dreams.

I was so, so sick and tired of those dreams. So tired of getting agitated at every thought of destruction, injury, mayhem. So tired of waiting helplessly for them to come.

Because I knew, whether in a year or a hundred, they would come. They always did.

Sam knew a little. I couldn’t tell Raven; he was too young to understand the importance of secrecy. Ash had me figured out, but then, we were very much alike in our abilities. It was like watching a chess match. She saw a single, distinct move on the chessboard. I saw the game from start to finish. And I hated every moment of it. And I liked chess. So that’s saying something.

I told Sam what I could say safely in Raven’s company then parted ways, heading home, waiting for fate to have its

way with me. I knew God was there. But sometimes I just couldn't quite feel His presence. This was one of those times.

I lay on my bed. And waited. Praying for time. Any time. Time for me to be ready, to stop it. But you can't stop an avalanche, nor a flood, nor a storm, nor the dreadful doom of being chased every night by Hell's minions and nobody to talk to about it. So I just prayed.

And waited.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taylor Hunter is a teenager living in Boise, Idaho with her parents and a lot of pets. Her interests include engineering, ceramics, story boarding, film making, epic fantasy movies, and all things Marvel. She has a green belt in Tae Kwon Do, got her motorcycle endorsement at the same time she received her driver's license, and is exceptionally accurate with her compound bow.

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