
CHAPTER

1

A Long Way to Go

Darrel clutched Digory's neck, twining his fingers in the warmth of the gryphon's feathers. Fog obliterated all but a few feet around them, as though they hung in a broth of thick soup instead of flying through a murky sky. The journey from the battlefield at Proteus's estate to bring Darrel's burned dad back to the Time Wizard's home had started out in relative calm, but now the weather had turned to crap. He wasn't even sure how Digory knew where they were going. Darrel dug his knees into the gryphon's sides to keep

from falling off. They should've reached the castle in a day at most, but morning had slipped into evening, and he had the feeling they weren't even close.

Maisy flew alongside Digory in the form of her nothos, a majestic white owl, helping to guide them through the fog. Her wide-eyed gaze penetrated the smothering gloom with an ease that Darrel could only imagine. How many times had her owl vision saved them? Her wing feathers drooped as she cut through another blast of wind. *She's tired*, he thought. They were all tired.

Darrel shifted and glanced over his shoulder to where the Time Wizard gripped Darrel's dad in a one-armed bear hold, and his mouth moved nonstop keeping a shield spell in place. His dad lay limp in the Wizard's arm, his skin ashen. White puffs of air slipped through his parched lips.

The crazy worry squeezing Darrel's throat eased a bit. His dad still lived.

Would they make it to the Wizard's home in time? The gift of dragonblood had brought Darrel back from death earlier today, but the only blood left lay embedded in the tip of his sword. Ten precious drops. His dad's last chance for survival. Jansen had fashioned them into the sword, but would he be able to extract them for his dad? Before it was too late?

He scowled to himself. No negative thoughts. This was his dad's only chance.

Yet creases etched the Wizard's brow. Darrel faced forward, pressing against Digory's neck, urging him to hurry. The gryphon's muscles strained beneath Darrel's wind-burned cheek, his feathered chest heavy with shallow, labored breaths. "C'mon Digory," Darrel murmured. "You can do this."

A draft sucked the gryphon downward, lifting Darrel from his seat. Darrel grasped the gryphon's neck feathers with both hands while the rest of his body sailed up as though he were being catapulted into space. His fingers started slipping on the slick feathers.

"Digory!" Darrel's stomach rose to meet his mouth. The wind rushed past him, roaring in his ears. Pure grit, and maybe a smudge of luck, kept him from losing his hold. Digory pumped his wings rising enough to level out. Darrel's butt slammed on the gryphon's back. After a quick over-the-shoulder check, Digory pushed on.

A quick look behind him showed Darrel that the shield had kept his dad and the Time Wizard safe and on board. Maybe the Wizard had his own gravity thing going on. Whatever it was, he was thankful for it. Maisy had fallen behind, though. Pumping her wings wildly,

she managed to snatch Digory's tail with her beak, hitching a ride. They all needed to rest.

Darrel smoothed a hand against Digory's bronze, metallic feathers. "Digory!" Darrel stretched his head as far as he dared toward the gryphon's ear. "We need to find a place to stop. A safe place, where we can't be spotted."

Casting a yellow eye at Darrel, Digory bobbed his neck up and down and emitted an eerie scree into the gloom.

Darrel patted his thick feathers. "Thanks, Old Man."

The gryphon dove through the bleak sky. Darrel hugged his knees to the beast's sides. Fog turned to rain mixed with snow. Heavy drops pelted them as if warning them to give up. Was this horrible weather some sort of spell? Maybe such a brutal storm was usual for this world, but he had his doubts, especially after all that had happened while fighting Proteus.

At the end of their battle, Proteus had been taken from the battlefield, wounded, and Shaemaai'e's second sun had rifted back after decades of being absent. Its warmth and light had filled their small band of renegades with hope. Now Darrel was thinking twice about the change in weather. Icy pellets stung his cheeks and bare hands like needles. This couldn't be normal.

Just then, a ridge of mountains appeared, like the backbone of an old whale skeleton, stretching between sky and earth. At its base, he could make out a barren stretch of flat ground bordered by dense trees. It was as safe as they could've wished for. A small open area to land in, and a forest where they could hide and rest.

Digory dropped lower, aiming for the makeshift runway. Grunting, he slowed the flapping of his wind-battered wings and reached down with his talons. They scraped

along the slick ground and skidded to a stop. He folded one of his wings into his side and draped the other to the ground as a ramp.

Finally. Darrel had never been so happy to stop moving in his life. And that was saying something, since he never kept still.

The Time Wizard's chanting stopped. Darrel shifted his sheathed sword from his side to his back. He moved toward his father and placed both hands under his dad's shoulders. "All right. Let's do this." Struggling to keep his footing, he started down the icy wing feathers with the Time Wizard supporting his dad's feet.

Once they reached the ground, Digory drew in his wing against his heaving sides and closed his eyes. A twinge caught in Darrel's chest. "Thanks, Old Man. Why don't you shift and follow us in the forest? You can dry off and rest. We'll be okay for now."

Digory lowered his head and rubbed his beak against Darrel's shoulder. Then his body flashed into a swirling rainbow of metallic colors. A crackling buzz split the quiet as sparks flew around the gryphon, shiny feathers blurring into the earthy orange of a muscled old workhorse.

Maisy swooped in beside them, changing to a human in a blaze of shimmering silver and white. Aside from dark circles beneath her eyes, she seemed okay. "I'll keep Digory company while you help the Wizard with your dad."

Darrel felt like he could hug Maisy. Now he wouldn't be so torn between caring for two beings he loved dearly. "Thanks, Maisy." He almost hugged her but then drew back, his cheeks warm. She might get the wrong idea. She was his best human friend, and he didn't want to jeopardize that. Instead, he lightly nudged her shoulder. "You're the best."

“Yeah, sure.” Maisy grinned, her white-blond hair still shimmering from the shift.

But as nonchalant as she tried to be, Darrel saw her cheeks tinge pink. A weird, fluttery feeling passed through him. What the heck? Was he going to get sick? He hurried to his dad and the Wizard.

The woods behind them lay thick with twisted, gnarled trees and scraggly brush. Shelter from the wind should be easy to find here. Darrel carried his dad, following the others as they worked their way deeper into the trees, until they reached a small clearing. He lay his dad on a carpet of half-frozen moss, protected by tree limbs and placed the blanket over him, tucking it in gently. Darrel grimaced, wishing he had something better to offer than frozen ground, but ice and cold were good for burns, right? Maisy drew up beside him, leading Digory.

“Where are we?” Darrel asked her. The trees surrounding them were different than any Darrel had ever seen. Smooth, white-gray bark ran the length of the trunks. The branches overhead wove a protective ceiling of deep green, almost purple-black leaves, each about the size of his torso. He inhaled a lungful of spearmint-scented air.

“This is the Dai doya forest, which means scent leaves. Unlike where you live, mint grows on trees here, and the leaves are a lot bigger.”

“Yeah. Even I figured out the last part.” Darrel said, looking at her sideways.

Maisy chuckled, but her slender shoulders drooped. She craned her neck, gazing up toward the sky and yawned. “Same uses, though—indigestion, rashes, inflammation, pain.”

Darrel followed her gaze. The leaves started high above the ground, about four times his

height. He couldn't tell how tall the trees were. Their tops disappeared beyond the tangle of leaves above. "At least they keep most of the sleet and wind from reaching us."

The Wizard began tracing a circle in the dirt with a broken branch. Words unfamiliar to Darrel rolled off his tongue. He raised the stick about a foot higher each time he walked the perimeter until his stick seemed to be knitting together an arched ceiling. Though the walls couldn't be seen, a shimmering suggestion of what Darrel imagined was an invisible dome had been formed over them.

When the Wizard finished, he sank to the ground, cross-legged, close to where Darrel's dad lay. No one would've mistaken him for anything except a tired, old man. Darrel hoped more wizarding lay beneath the tiredness. They had a long way to go.

Darrel's dad groaned and slid his tongue over wind-chapped lips.

“He doesn’t look good. What can I do?” Darrel turned away and ran a hand through the cowlick running wild on the crown of his head.

“He is holding his own, but he is weak and dehydrated.” The Wizard wrapped his shaking hands in his beard. “I need to boil a mixture for him to drink, but I dare not waste the energy to start a fire. Do you still have matches?”

Darrel felt his shirt pocket, the bulge reassuring him they were still there. “Yeah. I’ll start a fire.” Glad to be of use, he began gathering sticks and dried leaves from the littered forest floor.

“I need one of those leaves from the Dai doya tree also.” The Wizard pointed to the treetops. “Can you climb up there and break one off? My magic is quite dim at the moment. I must save it to make the brew.”

“Sure. Let me get a fire going, then I’ll do it.” Darrel finished gathering the sticks and nursed the tinder until a blaze warmed the dome, and soothing crackles and spits were the only sounds in the room. Finished, he stared straight up. The nearest leaves had to be at least twenty feet above the ground. He got dizzy just thinking about it.

Maybe Maisy’d be a better pick. She could wing up there and back a lot easier than he could manage to climb. He glanced at Maisy stretched out on the ground along the wall. She was too tired to shift. He could tell without even asking. Time for him to suck it up and get it done.

Darrel ran his hands over the near-invisible dome walls, hoping he could just walk right through. Not a chance. The walls were as solid as stone. He turned to ask the Wizard how to get out, but the old man snored softly, his head pillowed on his rolled-up beard. Crap. No help

there. Maybe if he pictured the border of a door in front of him, like some prisoners had in a fantasy movie he'd seen, then moved forward in slow, deliberate steps, he'd make it out of the dome. He concentrated, then strode straight into the wall, bouncing off it like a basketball off a backboard. He massaged his throbbing nose. Well, strike one.

Maybe he hadn't concentrated hard enough. Maybe he had to make a run at it. He dusted off his pants. Staring toward the woods, he changed his tactic a bit. Instead of just visualizing a door, he visualized it wide open, let himself feel the cold rushing in, imagined the scent of mint filling the air. Feeling much better prepared this time, he inhaled until his lungs couldn't take in one more molecule and ran toward the forest.

Next thing he knew, he lay flat on his back. Pain echoed through his bones. The sword's length dug into his spine. Why couldn't the

Wizard have just told him how to get out? Or created an opening? Couldn't have taken that much energy, could it? Discouraged, he stared at the trees towering above him. Even if he could get out, how would he get to the leaves?

Darrel rubbed his sore hip with a hand, then lay both hands on his chest. Feeling a familiar bulge in his shirt, he smiled. The leaded bat skin pouch. It didn't hold the amulet anymore, but if he concentrated hard enough, maybe he'd be able to down dream far enough to get past the wall. He'd never tried on purpose before and knew the risk involved, but this short distance couldn't cause much harm, could it? Then again, he could end up on the moon.

Pulling the pouch from beneath his shirt, he clasped both hands around it, unsure what to do. Every down dream he'd had before was an accident. He concentrated on the ceiling of huge leaves high above him and pictured

himself standing under them. A strange weakness spread through his body. Tingles ran over his skin, and a sudden tiredness crept over him. Suddenly, an ice-ball formed in his stomach. Maybe he shouldn't have tried this. He fought the sleep invading his mind, but his eyelids fluttered shut. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't open them. The sweet, woody smell of the fire filled his head.

Darrel's breath let out in a whoosh, and he inhaled again to find the air heady with the smell of mint. Something scratched his cheeks. He opened his eyes to find himself dangling from a snow-capped branch near the top of a leafy tree. The wind wailed through the leaves like a yowling cat. He pulled himself onto the branch, hoping with every breath that he wouldn't fall and break his neck. He wiped the back of a hand across his face. Blood. Just great. At least he was within easy reach of the leaves.

Breaking off three, he eased them partway into the waistband at the back of his pants. He wanted to keep them safe. Besides, he'd need both hands to get down from here.

Branch by branch, he climbed lower. But the branches grew scarcer until all that remained was bare trunk, the ground still two stories below. Jumping that far would probably kill him. And where was that dome? The clearing was there, but he couldn't see Maisy or the others. The Wizard must've charmed it to make them invisible. He rested his forehead against the trunk's cool bark. What now? Was he even at the same clearing?

Looking down again, he grew lightheaded and clamped his eyes shut. He'd never felt dizzy flying on Digory, but he hadn't been alone then. Fine time to find out he had a fear of heights.

Glancing below him again, Darrel gulped. He'd have to slide down, like a fireman on a

firehouse pole. Wrapping his arms and legs around the trunk, he began a slow descent, nostrils burning with the scent of mint. Though the trunks had looked smooth from the forest floor, there were still burrs and layers of peeling bark. His hands burned with cold. Blood trickled from scrapes on his face.

The trunk was becoming wider as Darrel neared the bottom and he struggled to keep his arms wrapped around it. What was he going to do now? An echoing howl filled the forest. Darrel sucked in a breath. What was that? He couldn't care less how high off the ground he clung. He wanted the safety of the dome. He dropped to the forest floor and landed on his back. His poor spine was probably black and blue from all the falls he'd taken. Branches and small rocks dug into his skin through his jacket. But not the sword. What'd happened to his sword?

Shadows moved between the trunks around him. They had no real shape or form, like something out of a nightmare...or memory.

He rolled to his stomach, feeling the area around him. The sword must've slipped out of the scabbard when he fell. Why'd it have to be so dark? Darn storm and tree cover. On his knees, he caught a glimpse of the sword's handle a few feet in front of him, toward the woods where the shadows moved. Of course. Breathing like he'd run a few miles, he scabbled to his feet, rushed toward the sword and scooped it up, then made a U-turn toward where the clearing should be.

Sword waving wildly in one hand, he raced forward. Howls and paws crunching through dried leaves followed close behind him. Another throaty howl clipped the air, even closer than before. Why hadn't he listened to the Wizard? Down dreaming was dangerous

and difficult. Always thought he was so smart. Now he'd pay for it.

A claw raked his back, snagging his jacket. Something heavy pounced on him, driving him face first to the ground. Jaws snapped around Darrel's ankle, and the creature started dragging him in the opposite direction. Darrel shrieked. Was his ankle still attached to his leg? His belly and chest bounced over the cold, uneven ground. He cried out, trying to shield his head with one arm and grasp the sword tight in his other hand. He swiped the blade behind him, but fighting with a sword behind his back with one hand wasn't a technique he'd mastered.

Another shape landed on his back, heavier than any shadow had a right to be. He wiggled, trying to throw the heaviness off his back with every ounce of strength he had, eyes squeezed shut against the forest debris whizzing past.

"Darrel! Wake up!"

Darrel startled to consciousness with Maisy and the Wizard shaking him. He lay face down on the ground beneath the dome. He must've fallen asleep trying to get out of the dome. Now he'd catch it.

"What happened?" Maisy asked. "Your clothes are all wet and torn. We thought you were missing."

Maisy was in tears, but the Wizard eyed him with a cold stare. "Do you know what could have happened? Why do you think I locked that amulet away?" The Wizard's voice shook. "Why do you always insist on closing your ears to advice?"

Darrel sheathed the sword still gripped in his hand, pulse hammering against his throat and ears. He wiped blood from his face and stared down at his torn, muddy clothes. His ankle ached, and he glanced down expecting to see it in shreds, but it was just swollen. He

must've twisted it when he dropped from the tree. It had all really happened.

He'd down dreamed.

A shiver crept up his arms. At least he'd made it back. He really needed to learn down dreaming better. He could've died, and they'd never have known what'd happened to him. He was supposed to leave something of his essence behind. A connection bringing him back to where he started. Only because there'd been people to call him back and wake him had he been able to find his way. He still hadn't learned to wake himself yet either. What if he'd ended up somewhere else? And never woke up?

"You...my dad needed leaves. And you were all asleep." Darrel couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice as he squared his shoulders and reached behind him. "I did the best I could." He pulled the three leaves from his waistband

and shoved them into the Wizard's hands.
"Here's your leaves."

The Wizard snatched the leaves and turned away, his shoulders shaking—in anger, frustration, or something else, Darrel couldn't tell. And right now, he didn't much care. He'd gotten the stinking leaves, hadn't he? They were a bit withered but in one piece. Thank goodness.

To distract himself, Darrel stoked the small fire in the middle of the dome, then slumped in a heap beside his dad. The gurgling sounds deep in his dad's chest broke Darrel's heart. He lay a hand on his dad's, marveling at the contrast of his coffee-colored skin against his father's deep ebony skin, now glistening with sweat.

The Wizard steeped one of the leaves in melted snow, all the while shooting Darrel withering glares. A soothing menthol cough-drop smell drifted through the air, filling the

dome. Now it wasn't just him that stank of mint. Darrel moved aside as the Wizard carried the cup over and held it against his dad's lips.

His dad cracked open his eyelids, his eyes bloodshot and wild, and looked around him. He struggled to speak but only managed a few grunts.

Darrel sighed, feeling helpless as he watched the Wizard's pinched face, ashamed for causing more worry to the already exhausted old man. Darrel placed his mouth near his dad's ear. "Dad, try to drink. The Wizard says it'll help. Please try." He watched anxiously as his dad managed a few sips of the warm, minty liquid. At once, his body relaxed against the Wizard's lap.

"That's good, Anath." The Time Wizard patted his brother's shoulder. "Soon we will be at my home. Just hang in there a bit longer."

Darrel's dad nodded.

Hovering his fingers over his dad's heart, Darrel remembered yet again his dad's words to him when he was a little boy. *I don't think I'll make the game, Son. But I'll be there in your heart, so if you put your hand right here,*" his dad would tap his chest, *"you'll know I'm with you."*

He leaned over so he could feel the faint but reassuring puffs of breath from his dad's mouth and whispered, "I want you at the game, Dad. Please hang on."

But no matter how long he held his fingers over his dad's heart, he still felt so far away.