Eleanor Orange and the Angel Fire

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Chapter One:
You're Not Aunt Cathy

There was something very wrong with Aunt Cathy.

Eleanor Orange didn't know what, exactly, but then she didn't know her very well. Aunt Cathy lived in Canada, you see. She hadn't been to England for six years, and Ellie had only spoken to her on the phone every now and then.

Aunt Cathy had arrived unannounced a week ago, on the Oranges' doorstep. Ellie didn't remember her being this... weird.

There's nothing wrong with being weird, you understand. Everyone is weird in their own way, it's just that some people hide it better than others.

Aunt Cathy wasn't hiding it very well.

Now, for instance. She had called them into the kitchen: "*Children!* It is time for your evening meal!"

There was a frozen lasagne on the table, and Aunt Cathy was sawing into it with a bread knife. She wore sunglasses, and a baseball cap perched atop her curly hair.

The baseball cap, Ellie recognised as belonging to her nine-year-old brother, Finley.

"She asked to borrow it," Finley said with a shrug, as he walked past her to the table.

"Wash your hands, Finley Orange," said Aunt Cathy. "Cleanliness is very important."

Grumbling, Finley went to the sink.

"*What's with the sunglasses?*" This had come from Ellie's best friend, Chelsy, who was staying for dinner.

"*What's with the frozen lasagne?"* Ellie raised her voice. "Er, Aunt Cathy? Aren't you supposed to put it in the microwave?"

Aunt Cathy looked up. "What? I don't think so?"

"N-no..." said Chelsy. "You *are* supposed to put it in the microwave. Or the oven."

Aunt Cathy looked momentarily startled, and then gave a little laugh. "Oh yes, silly me! In the microwave." And she picked up the lasagne, looked around the kitchen as if she'd never been in one, and then carried it to the coffee maker and opened the lid.

"No!" Ellie and Chelsy both said together.

"No?" said Aunt Cathy.

"It might work," Finley mused. "It gets hot, doesn't it?"

Ellie hurried over and took the lasagne off her before she could try and cook it in the kettle or something. "Don't they have microwaves in Canada, Aunt Cathy?"

"Do you know, I'm not sure!" said Aunt Cathy.

Very weird indeed. They definitely *did* have microwaves in Canada.

I hope Mum and Dad get back soon, Ellie thought, *before Aunt Cathy poisons us.*

Her parents worked with Chelsy's dad in the laboratory at the bottom of the garden, doing some physics stuff. They were scientists, which was a pretty cool job for your parents to have, especially in Peddleton Village, which didn't even have its own post office anymore.

Today they were working late, which was why Aunt Cathy had been asked to cook dinner.

Ellie was only eleven, but she knew how to work the microwave, and she got the lasagne cooking. She considered asking her aunt to wash some salad, but thought Aunt Cathy might just put the lettuce in the dishwasher or something. Nothing would surprise her, the way she was acting.

Or so Ellie thought.

The four of them ate their microwave lasagne, and Aunt Cathy said afterwards, "Well that was simply *divine*. The best meal I have ever eaten, Eleanor Orange." And then she cleared up all the plates and threw them in the bin.

The three children just stared at each other, mouths open.

Aunt Cathy said, "I am now going to turn on the television set. There is a programme about dogs I wish to enjoy." And she disappeared into the lounge.

Ellie had to fish the plates and cutlery out of the dirty bin bag and put them in the sink to soak. "Yuck."

Chelsy said in a low voice, "Is she normally like this?"

Ellie shrugged. "Dunno. I don't really remember the last time she visited. I was only five."

"She's *mental*," Finley said.

Ellie frowned at him. "Don't say 'mental', Fin. It's not very nice." She let her hair down and pulled the purple scrunchie onto her wrist.

"You should tell your parents," Chelsy said. "She tried to feed us frozen lasagne."

"And then she threw the plates in the *bin*," Finley added.

"I know. *I'm* the one who had to get them out." Ellie looked through the open kitchen door into the lounge. She could see the back of Aunt Cathy's head.

She was wearing Fin's *baseball cap*. Would *your* auntie do that?

And that's when the phone rang.

It was the landline.

The girls couldn't remember a time before mobile phones, and didn't understand why anyone would want or need a landline plugged into the wall.

"Children, can you answer that?" called Aunt Cathy, without turning her head. "I am watching a programme about dogs."

And so Ellie picked up the telephone and said, "Hello?"

"That must be Eleanor!" said the voice. "Am I right?"

And Ellie went cold, because she recognised that voice. Recognised the accent. "Er... yes... Sorry, who is this?"

"It's your Aunt Cathy from Canada! You sound so grown up!"

What?

No. It couldn't be...

Aunt Cathy was in the lounge watching her dog programme. Ellie was looking at the back of her head right now.

She looked like her aunt.

She *sounded* like her aunt.

But Ellie, she sure isn't <u>acting</u> like your aunt, is she? She's not even acting like a real <u>person</u>.

Ellie clenched the receiver as the Aunt Cathy on the phone said, "Eleanor? Hello? Are you still there?"

Chelsy must have seen Ellie's expression, because she screwed up her face like a pug and whispered, "*Who is it? What's the matter?*"

The Aunt Cathy in the living room turned her head. It was as if she could feel Ellie's eyes boring into her.

Ellie gasped and even did a little startled jump. She'd half expected the living room Aunt Cathy to have someone else's face. But no. She still looked like Aunt Cathy.

"Eleanor?" said the Aunt Cathy in the living room.

"Eleanor?" said the Aunt Cathy in Canada.

"I'm sorry..." Ellie managed into the phone. "I've got to go..." and she hung up.

"Who was that on the telephone?" asked the Aunt Cathy in the living room.

Ellie felt her skin go all prickly. "Er..."

Well what could she say? *Actually, Aunt Cathy, it was you?*

"It was Elvis," she said, the words just tumbling out of her. "Elvis Presley."

Aunt Cathy's expression did not change. She gave a mildly interested, "Oh?" and said, "Is she in your class at school?"

Ellie swallowed, trying to keep the horrified look off her face. "Y-yes. We're doing a school project together. Me, Chelsy and... and Elvis."

"Alright," said Aunt Cathy. "Well I hope you get extremely good marks." And she turned back to the TV.

Ellie could feel Chelsy and Finley staring at her. She felt like a zombie, her head spinning and spinning.

That is not Aunt Cathy, she thought. It's the only thing that made sense... except of course it made no sense at all.

The Aunt Cathy in the living room was not really Aunt Cathy, because Aunt Cathy was still in Canada. And she didn't wear baseball caps, and she knew how to work a microwave.

"*Are you alright?*" Chelsy whispered. "You look like you're going to faint."

No, she was not alright. They had to get out of the house, away from this fake Aunt Cathy. They had to get down to the lab, to their parents.

Ellie swallowed. "We need to get out of here."

Chelsy frowned, and then laughed. "What?"

Ellie wasn't laughing. She was almost sick with panic. "*Now, Chelsy.*"

Chelsy stopped laughing when she saw Ellie was serious. "Why?"

"We just do, okay?"

Finley could see how frightened she was, and he somehow managed to hold in the annoying younger brother part of him. It must have taken a lot of effort. "Who was on the phone, Ellie?"

Ellie couldn't tell them. It was too crazy. They wouldn't believe her. So she just said, "We need to go to Mum and Dad *now*, okay? But we can't tell Aunt Cathy. We just need to go."

"Eh?"

"Children? What's all this whispering about?" There was the sound of Aunt Cathy rising from the sofa with a creak. She started coming towards the open doorway.

"*Come on!*" Ellie dragged Chelsy and Finley into the hall, her heart thumping and her skin itchy and prickling.

"What's the matter?" Chelsy asked.

Finley shouted, "Hey! Gerroff!"

But she didn't gerroff, she dragged them both to the front door.

"Children, you stop right there!" yelled the woman who was *not* Aunt Cathy. She stood in the lounge doorway with her hands on her hips. "Why are you behaving in this manner?"

Ellie grabbed the front door handle. Locked. She scrabbled frantically at the keys hung on hooks above the shoe rack.

Chelsy said, "This isn't funny, Ellie."

And Finley said, "You're a real moron."

And Ellie said, "That's *not* Aunt Cathy." And then she plucked the front door key and jammed it against the lock with shaking hands.

Aunt Cathy started to run down the hall towards them.

And Ellie dropped the key.

Nooo!

She could feel tears starting to burn her eyes, could hear her frantic breathing, and she scooped the key up, bending a nail back against the old wooden floor but not feeling the pain, sliding it into the key hole finally...

And that's when Aunt Cathy tripped over the side table in the hall and went down flat on her face.

The three kids gasped.

"Is... is she alright?" Chelsy croaked, and she was squeezing Ellie's wrist a lot harder than necessary.

"You've killed her!" said Finley.

Ellie just stood there with the key in the lock, not a clue what to do now.

And then Aunt Cathy lifted her head. She cried, "Ouch!", and then jumped to her feet with a trio of farts like trumpet toots.

Ellie, Chelsy and Finley all screamed, and Ellie turned the key and wrenched the front door open. Cold night air blew around them as they stumbled out onto the porch steps.

"She's coming!" yelled Chelsy, and Ellie slammed the door closed just in time. They both heard Aunt Cathy smack against the wood, and through the thin stained windows in the door they saw her bounce to the floor again.

This time, Ellie managed to get the key into the lock first time, and she turned it just as Aunt Cathy jumped up and grabbed at the handle.

The door handle wiggled and jiggled but the door was locked. It wouldn't budge.

"Naughty children! You come back here right now!" she yelled through the door.

They backed away, jumping as Aunt Cathy threw her body against it, as if trying to break through. Chelsy forgot there was a step behind her and fell flat on her butt.

"T-that's *not* your aunt?" she asked as Ellie helped her up.

"No. I know it sounds mad, but that was the *real* Aunt Cathy on the phone. She's still in Canada."

"*What?"* said Finley.

"I *promise*, Fin. I'm not making it up. And we've all said how weird she's acting."

At that moment Aunt Cathy launched a flying kick at the door, making it shudder violently.

"Look - is that how a normal person acts?"

"We need to tell our parents," said Chelsy. "Come on."

They worked in a lab at the bottom of the Oranges' huge garden, and as the kids ran across the grass they heard a long shriek from the house. There were no words to it. It was just a loud, high-pitched noise, as if Aunt Cathy were trying to communicate with the foxes.

She was climbing out of the lounge window.

Chapter Two:
The Laboratory

"Hurry!"

They ran as fast as they could across the grass, round the bottom of the garden and between the trees, towards the large brick building in the distance. It looked like a barn, without windows, with one glass double door lit up from the inside.

The letters OSS were printed high on one wall.

Orange. Stiddin. Sharma.

The partners' surnames.

The Orange estate's sweeping driveway had been extended when the science lab had been built. It forked off, one way towards the house, the other to the lab. They could run easier on the concrete.

What if the door's locked? Ellie thought suddenly, as they were crossing the small car park.

It wasn't.

They threw it open, sighed in relief, dashed inside, and pulled the door closed.

Aunt Cathy was hurtling across the lawn towards them. She went down flat on her face - must have tripped over a knoll - and then was back up and running again.

The lab had never had a security guard, nor a receptionist, so the lobby was deserted. Ellie looked for something to barricade the door, but there was nothing, and Aunt Cathy was already running across the car park, nearly upon them.

"Come on!" Chelsy yelled. She and Finley were halfway across the lobby.

They ran to the double doors in the opposite wall and pushed them open. The corridor lights flickered on. There were two offices on the left wall, both dark.

They must still be down with their experiments, Ellie thought.

Her dad had been saying they were close to some kind of breakthrough. They'd been working late for weeks. Physics stuff. Particle accelerators and multiple dimensions and lots of other things that sounded made up.

The double doors behind them clapped open and Aunt Cathy stood filling the threshold, her arms outstretched, grunting like a bull about to charge.

"Just what in the diddly-piddly are you children *doing?*"

"You're not Aunt Cathy," Ellie said, and then pushed open the door to the lab proper. She, Chelsy and Finley skipped down the metal staircase, their feet booming with each step. "Mum! Dad!"

There was a loud whirring noise down here, coming from a large circular machine that looked a bit like a jet engine. There were rows of red and yellow cables as thick as tree trunks and banks of servers and computers flashing lights.

Michelle Orange stood in the middle of the room, facing the machine with an iPad. For about three years she'd dyed ginger streaks in her hair. Ellie didn't know why.

Christopher Orange was at the banks of computers with Peter Stiddin, Chelsy's dad.

There was no sign of Alina Sharma, the fourth partner at OSS.

The three adults wore lab coats and protective goggles, and Christopher and Peter wore ear protectors too, because they were so close to the droning jet engine.

This meant only Michelle heard the children coming down the stairs. She turned, suddenly worried.

"Mum!" Ellie screamed over the din, grabbing her by one sleeve.

"Kids, what's the matter? What's happened?"

None of the children had ever bothered them in the lab before, so it was clear something was wrong.

"It's about Aunt Cathy!" Ellie yelled. "She's not... I mean, she isn't..." She wasn't exactly sure how to explain. "She's not *her*!" Ellie knew this didn't make any sense, but it's all she had, alright?

Her mother frowned at her, and then the door flew open again with a clank, and in the threshold stood Aunt Cathy herself (except it wasn't Aunt Cathy herself, of course, because Aunt Cathy herself was in Canada, keep up).

"*Eleanor Orange, what is all this nonsense?*" yelled Aunt Cathy, coming down the stairs.

"I got a phone call," Ellie said quickly, grabbing her mother by both arms this time. "It was from *Aunt Cathy*. Except she is still in *Canada*."

Michelle Orange looked from Ellie to the Aunt Cathy coming down the stairs and then back again. "She... she's not in Canada, Ellie, she's right there..."

"That's not Aunt Cathy!" Ellie yelled.

"I most certainly *am* Aunt Cathy," said Aunt Cathy. "I think someone's playing a prank!" And she walked up to them so she was only

a few paces away and put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows.

Ellie hid behind her mother, dragging Chelsy and Finley away.

Chelsy looked very confused. Of course, she hadn't heard the phone call herself.

Finley said, "I didn't want to come down here, Mum! It's all Eleanor's fault!"

"I am *not* playing a prank!" yelled Ellie.

"It's not like her to play pranks," Michelle Orange said, almost in an apologetic way to Aunt Cathy, who everyone seemed to believe *was* Aunt Cathy after all.

"Maybe you misheard the phone call?"

Ellie shook her head. "How could I mishear *'Aunt Cathy'*?"

"Lots of things sound like 'Aunt Cathy'," said Aunt Cathy.

"Like what?"

There aren't many things at all.

"Staffie?" said Aunt Cathy. "Faffy?"

"Colonel Gaddafi?" said Finley.

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't Colonel Gaddafi on the phone, *Finley,*" Ellie snapped.

"He's dead."

"Girls! Fin!" said Christopher Orange, having finally noticed them. "Cath... What are you doing down here? You're supposed to be watching them at the house."

"They ran away from me!" said Aunt Cathy, which was true, strictly speaking. "Locked me inside!"

"What?"

Peter Stiddin, Chelsy's dad, took off his ear protectors and said, "They locked you in the house?" He looked at his daughter, who seemed to shrink at Ellie's shoulder.

"I had to climb out the window," said Aunt Cathy.

Before anyone could wonder whether she was joking (the girls, of course, knew she was not), the jet engine thing started to whir even louder, and Christopher Orange and Peter Stiddin jumped and hurriedly replaced their ear defenders before retreating a few steps.

"Woah!"

"What did you do?" asked Michelle, as the engine spun faster and faster and started to spark.

"I *told* you it was calibrated," Christopher said excitedly, running to one of the computers.

"Kids, keep back," said Peter, hurrying over to a terminal on the other side of the jet engine.

Michelle had taken a short breath. "Wow, okay..." She pushed Ellie, Chelsy and Fin back with one arm and started jabbing furiously at her iPad.

"What *is* that thing?" Chelsy asked as the jet engine hummed, spinning so fast it was just a blur, and more white sparks started zapping from it. It looked dangerous, like it might explode at any second.

No one answered her question.

Christopher Orange finished tapping away at the computer and stepped back. "Are you getting the readings, Mish?" he said to his wife.

"Yes! Off the scale!" She was staring at the iPad transfixed and then goggling at the machine. "I think... I think it's working!"

Chelsy's dad had left his terminal too, backing away like you would from an escaped wild animal at the zoo. "Have we done it?" he asked.

"I don't know, Pete..." Christopher looked at Michelle, whose mouth creased in the beginnings of a smile.

"What are you doing?" Finley asked after a moment. He could be very nosy, could Finley.

He had been known to ask that exact question to someone in the toilet.

Aunt Cathy didn't say a word. She just stared at the machine.

Faster and faster it whirred, the humming getting higher in pitch, the sparks sparking and spitting all over the floor.

Then there was a flash so bright Ellie threw her arms up in front of her face to shield it.

Chapter Three:
That Wasn't Supposed To Happen

She closed her eyes, staggering back as if pushed. The back of her eyelids glowed red.

"Woah!" someone cried.

There were crackles, like a firework. And then the light began to fade.

Somehow, Ellie had ended up on the floor.

Something clicked, and then the humming from the machine got lower. It was starting to slow.

"Everyone's eyes okay?" Peter asked. "That was bright!"

"Was it what I think it was?" said Christopher.

"I think it was... I think it was!"

Ellie didn't understand what the dads were so excited about. She blinked hurriedly to clear the stars from her vision.

"Are you alright?" Her mother crouched down and put a hand on her shoulder. "Did you trip?" Her face was flushed and bright at the same time.

"I must have." Ellie took her mother's free hand (she was still holding the iPad), and Chelsy offered her hand too. Chelsy kept blinking like she had just woken up. They pulled Ellie to her feet.

Ellie's body was tingling and numb at the same time. There was a farm just down the road, and she and Chelsy would often walk Chelsy's sausage dog Rex down the public footpath. One time Ellie had brushed the electric fence that kept the cows back. And she felt like that now - all tingly, like she'd just touched an electric fence.

"What happened?" Chelsy asked. "Dad?"

"We are on the verge of a historic breakthrough," Peter said. He didn't look over. He was busy at the terminal again.

The jet engine had finally slowed to a stop.

"Mish, tell us what the readouts were?"

She swiped on the iPad. "Protons and electrons off the scale, as I said. Standard deviation 2.05. Temp over a thousand degrees."

"Velocity?"

"98 percent of the speed of light."

"Okay."

Michelle Orange set the iPad down on one of the banks of servers. "I'm going to call Alina."

Alina Sharma was the fourth partner at OSS.

"Fine." Christopher and Peter were now huddled round the same computer, deep in conversation. Every now and then one of them would point to the jet engine.

Ellie looked at Chelsy, who shrugged back at her, and then at Finley, who had gone over to peer at his mother's iPad, even though he couldn't possibly understand what was on it.

It was kind of exciting, even though they had no clue what was going on.

And then Ellie looked at Aunt Cathy, who was still standing a few paces away.

Aunt Cathy was staring at the jet engine, and her hands were clasping and unclasping. And then she said, at little more than a whisper, "This is how it happens."

And she looked at Ellie, straight at her, but also through her, as if Ellie wasn't there but also everywhere.

"How what happens?" Ellie asked.

Chelsy said, "Hmmm?" and looked round. She looked from Ellie to Aunt Cathy and back again.

Aunt Cathy turned her attention back to the machine. She said, "The Angel Fire."

Ellie and Chelsy looked at each other. "The Angel what now?"

But Aunt Cathy said no more. She just stared at the machine and clasped and unclasped her hands.

Then Michelle Orange reappeared. "Alina didn't answer. I left a voicemail."

"She'll kick herself," Christopher said, leaving Peter's terminal and heading to the one across the way.

"She's at her daughter's engagement party," Michelle said, retrieving the iPad from under Finley's nose.

"Well we're about to win the Nobel prize."

That's pronounced *No-bell*, not *nobble*. It's a world-famous award, not a biscuit.

The jet engine started spinning again.

"Kids, you shouldn't really be here," Michelle said.

"But *Muuum*..."

"I mean it, Ellie. It's dangerous."

"Mish!" Christopher called. "*How are the numbers?*"

She sighed and swiped at the iPad again. Then she frowned. "Protons off the scale again - but so are the positrons! Electrons are down 52

percent." Then she turned back to the children. "You need to leave. Aunt Cathy, will you please take them back up..."

But Aunt Cathy wasn't listening. She was staring at the machine in horror as it got faster and faster, and hummed higher and higher...

And then it started spitting out *black* sparks.

"Shut it off!" Aunt Cathy yelled. "*Shut it off right now!*"

She looked like she was going to run over there, but to what end Ellie had no idea. She remembered her mother saying that Aunt Cathy worked on the tills in a department store. Ellie was sure Aunt Cathy was very good at her job, but she didn't know how much she knew about quantum physics.

Except this *wasn't* Aunt Cathy.

"Cath, what are you..." Michelle didn't get to finish her sentence.

There was a tremendous *CRACK*, and it looked like the very *air* had split in two.

A pulsing black shape had appeared in front of the jet engine, like a large drop of oil. It shimmered, and it weaved, and it danced, and it was truly awful and terrifying.

"What the..."

Peter and Christopher both fell away from the writhing shape, transfixed by the horror of it.

And then *things* started flying out.

*

They were nightmarish shadow things, like large bats, flying out and up and disappearing through the ceiling like ghosts.

"Oh no..." Aunt Cathy whispered. "Please turn it off..."

Ellie's breath caught in her throat. She couldn't move. None of them could move. They were frozen, like a photograph.

She heard Chelsy whimper next to her, but it was only the slightest of noises. Not one of them had enough breath to scream.

And then one of the shadows shot out and struck Christopher Orange in the chest, knocking him over.

Dad! Ellie tried to say, but it caught in her throat. The word would not come out.

Michelle managed only a little scream. She was anchored to the floor as though stuck there in concrete.

Christopher grabbed his chest, wincing, but he too was sluggish with shock. He couldn't get his muscles working, couldn't get back to his

feet, so he just lay there on his back, looking up at the black hole cut out of the air.

And then the nightmare unfolded itself further, for out of that putrid black hole came a long bony arm, and a clawed hand with talons dripping black ichor. And it was as though that claw was sweeping up her body; she felt it on her skin and beneath her skin, clutching at her heart, her lungs, closing around her throat.

And then a face oozed out of the blackness, an awful, terrible face, following the clawed hand and the bony arm. The face was studded with teeth, like piercings, and its mouth was a yawning maw overflowing with serrated fangs, and it had at least a hundred eyes, all over the top of its head, pointing in all directions.

Oh my God... Ellie thought, her eyes so wide she thought they might pop right out of her head. *This can't be real...*

But it *was* real. She could see the monster's body sliding out into the lab, could hear the wet smacking sounds as the black goo dripped to the concrete, she could smell the rotten stench of it. It was real and it was coming for all of them.

Michelle Orange dropped the iPad and it smashed at her feet. Her mouth had come unhinged in a wide O of shock.

And then Aunt Cathy yelled out with all her strength, "*Turn it off!*" And it was as though she shocked her own limbs into action, because she got her legs working and she turned and ran back up the stairs.

Ellie's own legs, however, would not respond.

Chelsy had managed to take a couple of steps backwards, had even managed to grab Ellie's hand. But that was as far as she got. They were both now frozen in that position, holding hands, staring at the huge beast climbing out of the abyss as though from their own nightmares.

Why can't I move? Ellie thought. *Why can't I...*

It was Peter who finally snapped out of it. He turned back to the terminal and started tapping away frantically, his breath coming out in rips and shreds.

And then there was a *click*, and the jet engine powered down, and the black hole pulsed once, twice, and then snapped closed.

The monster climbing out of it was sheared in two. It's mouth clacked open, as though in surprise, and its hundred eyes rolled up, and its upper half fell limply at their feet.

Chapter Four:
What Came Out

No one moved for what seemed like ten whole minutes, but it could only have been a few seconds.

Peter Stiddin looked over at the children from the computer terminal. He was pale with shock. "Are you all okay?"

No one said anything. It was as though Peter's voice came from the moon.

Ellie could hear Finley's harsh frightened breathing behind her, but she couldn't turn her head to look at him. She couldn't drag her eyes away from the dismembered monstrosity lying dead before them. It's huge head, as big as a washing machine... One arm, one clawed hand... the other missing, chopped off by the closing black hole. The rest of its torso, its legs, if it had them, chopped off by the closing black hole.

Its mass of eyes had turned glassy, but she was still expecting them to swivel on her any moment.

Then she felt Chelsy squeeze her hand, and she managed to turn her head.

Shock and terror were written on every crevice of her friend's face, and she could see sweat patches on Chelsy's top.

Finley walked over to them. He was gawking at the dead monster.

And then her mum was there, enveloping them all in a protective hug. "You're alright... It's alright..."

It wasn't alright, obviously, that was a big fat lie - there was half a monster on the floor - but Ellie wanted to believe it, so she sort of did.

Then Michelle said, "Chris..." and hurried to her husband's side.

Christopher was slowly getting to his feet. "I'm alright," he said. "I think something knocked me over..."

Then Peter Stiddin ran across the lab, giving the monster a wide berth, and pulled Chelsy into a hug. "Chels, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"No Dad, I don't think so."

"Fin?" he asked. "Ellie? Are you both okay?"

No, of course I'm not okay. "Yes."

How were any of them okay? How were any of them going to be okay ever again?

Finley was just nodding. Gawping and nodding, his eyes bright. The kid was almost smiling, for God's sake.

Michelle helped a wheezing Christopher over to them, so the six of them stood in a little arc around the dead thing.

"What the hell is that?" Peter asked eventually.

"I don't know," said Michelle.

Nobody knew.

Finley said, "It's so cool."

"It is *not* cool, Finley. Jesus."

"At least the smell is fading," said Christopher, and it was. The monster had had a putrid, rotten stench when alive. Now Ellie could barely smell it at all. Unless your sense of smell could be shocked out of your head or something.

No one said anything for a long while, as if they were stood observing a minute's silence. Then Ellie said, "Where did it come from?"

The three adults looked at each other.

Ellie and Chelsy exchanged glances, because it was obvious they knew something.

"It's from... another dimension," Michelle said after a moment. "I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well..." She looked at her husband and then Peter for support. "It's what we've been doing in the lab... What OSS is all about..."

"You know we're physicists?" Christopher continued, picking up his wife's train of thought. For some reason, they were all talking in whispers, as if the dead monster might hear them and wake up. "And me and your mum, and Peter, and Alina - we all met at Cambridge?"

Ellie nodded. The four of them had studied at Cambridge University and then gone on to found OSS years later. Her mum had been her dad's research assistant whilst he did his PhD.

"We do quantum physics. That's..."

"Particles and stuff," said Ellie. "We know."

Finley frowned. "But what does that have to do with huge stinky monsters?"

"Because we've been using a particle accelerator to try and open a wormhole to other dimensions. And it looks like we succeeded."

The kids looked at each other. Having physicists as parents meant they mostly understood the big words in that sentence. Even Finley, who was only nine.

Particle accelerator - a machine that made little tiny particles whiz around really fast, because that produced *loads* of energy.

Make enough energy and you can cut a wormhole through space and time, meaning you could theoretically travel *anywhere* in space or time. Maybe? It was something like that - maybe you couldn't travel anywhere, and maybe you couldn't time travel, Ellie wasn't a hundred percent sure, but she knew it had nothing to do with actual worms.

And then, other dimensions? Well, they were like other worlds, or even other universes, where the laws of physics were probably the same as in our universe but not necessarily. Again, Ellie didn't hugely understand the physics but then she was only eleven, and she didn't have a PhD.

"This sounds like every science fiction film I've ever seen," said Chelsy.

Christopher shrugged. "But this one's happening to us."

There was another bout of silence, and then Ellie said, "So, firstly, that black hole thing appeared in thin air..."

"Well, *firstly*, there was that bright white light, if you remember," Michelle said.

Ellie remembered, she'd ended up on the floor, half-blind. "What was that?"

"Another dimension, we think." Mrs Orange looked at Christopher and Peter, who both nodded.

"The portal didn't stay open for very long," said Peter, "so we made some adjustments to the accelerator and tried again."

"Except this time we opened a portal to a different dimension." Michelle swallowed. "That 'black hole' you mentioned - look, I'm not going to call it a black hole because that means something else entirely in astronomy and I don't want it to get confusing. So I'm going to call it a portal. It's a portal to another dimension, and apparently *these* things live there..." and she jerked a finger at the dead monster.

"You let it out," Finley said.

And Michelle said, "Yes."

*

The stink from the thing had finally faded away now.

Christopher and Peter had bravely walked around the monster to wheel over the six wheely chairs from the computer terminals. They all sat in a small circle on the other side of the room.

Finley spun this way and that on his chair, a habit that annoyed Chris and Michelle no end, but at the moment they had more important things to worry about.

"There were other things," Ellie said. "Before that monster came out. Smaller flying things, like shadows. They flew out of the portal and disappeared up through the ceiling."

The adults looked at each other, their faces sick and pale, like mourners at a funeral. "I know. I saw them too."

And Michelle said, "What have we done?" and rubbed at her face.

"We opened a portal, Mish," Peter said. "No - we opened *two* portals. It's the greatest achievement of the century."

"Well forgive me for not celebrating," she snapped. "Did you see what came out?"

"Oh no, I hadn't noticed," said Peter sarcastically.

"Our children could have been *killed*."

Peter fell silent then, because that was true.

Christopher was rubbing his chest, absently, staring off into space. Michelle put a hand on his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, my chest still feels tight, that's all."

Ellie tried to catch her mum's eye, because she'd seen the shadow bowl into him and knock him to the floor like a skittle. "Do you need to go to hospital?"

He laughed. "And say what?"

"I don't know..."

"Ellie, I'm fine, honestly. But you three shouldn't be here. Your mum's right - you could have been killed. Why did you come down to the lab?"

And Peter added sternly, "You know the rules."

"Aunt Cathy..." Ellie began, and then she stopped. How could she explain about Aunt Cathy not being Aunt Cathy now, after everything that had happened?

"Aunt Cathy, yes - where is Aunt Cathy?" said Christopher. "Wasn't she here?"

"She ran away," Ellie said. "When that thing started crawling out."

Christopher put a hand to his head and said, "Oh Jesus. You know what your sister's like, Mish. She's going to be telling everyone. We're going to have the whole village here."

"She..." Michelle cut off abruptly, because she had no idea what her sister would do. She hadn't seen her in years. "Did you say something

about a prank phone call?" she asked Ellie, frowning. "I don't understand why you brought her down here?"

"I didn't bring her down here. She was chasing us."

"Chasing you?" Christopher said. "You were playing a game?"

"No... I..." but before she could continue her dad stood up.

"Anyway that's... hardly relevant."

Ellie thought it was very relevant, but she hadn't been able to get them to understand.

Christopher said, "What are we going to do about this? About the... the monster?"

"We need to call someone," said Peter.

"Who?"

"I don't know... MI6, or someone?"

"Oh, and do you have the number for MI6? Because I don't think I do."

"No, but we need to tell someone in the government. They've put two million pounds into this project."

"They'll want us to open the portal again," said Michelle. "We can't... they can't know what we did..."

"Then what are we going to do with that thing?" Peter said, his voice rising. "We can't exactly bury it in your garden!"

No one said anything to that. Pete sighed and rubbed his temples.

After a moment Christopher said, "Well, whatever we do, I don't want the kids down here anymore *looking at that monster*."

"*It's cool...*"

"Oh be quiet, Finley!"

Finley pulled a face and went back to swinging on his chair.

"We're not going back to the house..." Ellie said. "Please, Dad - you can't leave us on our own, not now..."

"You won't be on your own - Cath will be..." and then he sighed. "Oh, we don't know where Cath is, do we."

"I don't want to be left with Aunt Cathy either!"

"It's okay," Michelle said, "just stay with us for the moment." And then she said to Christopher, "It's understandable they don't want to be on their own right now."

He nodded. "Yeah, fine. Just... don't go near it, okay?"

Oh, shucks, Dad - I was going to give it a hug!

Ellie looked over at the monster and quickly looked away again, bile rising to the back of her throat.

"Okay," said Peter, and he had wheeled his chair over and sat next to Chelsy with his arm around her. "We need to tell someone about this... I mean, we can't possibly cover it up, right?"

Mr and Mrs Orange grudgingly said, "Right."

"But we have to be careful. This will be top level stuff. I mean men in black suits with ear pieces, security clearance, Prime Minister level stuff."

"Do you have his number?"

"Very funny. What day is it tomorrow? Wednesday? We'll have to tell the graduates not to come in." OSS had two physics graduates working as lab assistants. "And... I don't know if we should tell Alina."

"How can we not? She'll *see* it, and we can't tell her not to come to the lab; she's our partner."

"Not if it's sorted tonight."

"Pete, the lab will be closed down. They'll want to do all kinds of tests on the thing. It'll be months, probably. We'll *have* to tell Alina."

"She won't believe us."

Michelle sighed, frustrated, getting out her mobile. "She will believe us, because I'll show her this..." and she raised her phone to take a picture of the monster...

And then she stopped. Her face dropped. She said, "*What the*..."

She stood up and moved closer to the thing, and Christopher said, "Mish..." but she shushed him. She started taking photos, from all different positions, getting the monster from every angle.

Then she came back to the group. "There is something seriously weird going on. You all do *see* that thing, don't you?"

They could all see it.

"Of course," said Christopher, "why?"

And Michelle plonked herself in the middle of their chairs, holding her phone screen up so they could all see. "Because that monster isn't in any of the pictures. It's like it's invisible."

Chapter Five:
Now You See Me, Now You Don't

It was true. The monster was in none of the photos.

There were just a dozen shots showing the particle accelerator, and the banks of computer terminals, and the bare floor.

Yet the monster was *there* (well, half of it was) - they could see it with their bare eyes.

The stink had gone now, at least.

There were long, thin windows at the top of one wall, near the ceiling, and they had to be opened with a long pole with a winch. Peter grabbed that pole now and lowered it like a lance to the fallen monster.

He prodded it. The pole hit it and bounced off, its flesh puckering a little.

Peter dropped the pole in disgust and hopped backwards. "It's real," he said, just in case anyone was starting to think it an illusion. "It just... can't be caught on camera."

"That makes no sense," said Michelle. "It can't just *not show up on camera* when we can all see it."

Christopher and Peter had taken out their phones too, and opened the cameras.

Same thing.

Obviously doesn't like its picture being taken, Ellie thought. *A bit like Dad.* She had a huge urge to laugh for some reason and managed to hold it together.

Ellie had left her phone on the kitchen worktop, and Chelsy's phone couldn't take pictures because her dad wouldn't let her have a phone with a camera.

"You're lucky I've let you have a mobile phone at all, at your age," Peter had said on Chelsy's last birthday.

Finley wouldn't be allowed a phone at all until he was ten.

"Check the CCTV," Christopher Orange said suddenly. "Mish, where's the iPad?"

"I dropped it when that thing started climbing into the lab."

"Ah."

"Well then let's go upstairs to the office," Peter said. "We can check the CCTV and... I dunno, get the kids some sweets or something."

"And just leave that thing down here?"

"What, are you afraid it's going to come back to life?"

Christopher shrugged and said, "Kind of, yeah." And then he rubbed his chest again and grimaced.

"You need to rest," said Michelle sternly.

"You need to go to the hospital, Dad," Ellie said, realising her hands were still shaking and gripping them tight together to try and stop them.

"It's only bruised, Pumpkin," said Christopher. "I'm fine. Honestly."

And of course *we* know he is not fine, but that's just how the story goes unfortunately.

"Okay, how about this," said Peter. "We'll all go up to the office, check the CCTV, have a drink, decide what to do next."

That seemed like a good idea, certainly to the two girls, who really didn't want to be down here with the monster with all the teeth on its head, but didn't want to be up there alone either.

Ellie's legs felt wobbly, like the time she'd got sea sick and tried to walk on dry land after. She had to grip the hand rail tight as she climbed the stairs, as did Chelsy, and she was sure with each step that the monster would suddenly come alive again and they'd hear it dragging itself across the floor after them with its one arm.

But the monster stayed dead, and the stairs weren't infinite, and finally they were in the corridor upstairs again. Peter led them into the office and he booted up a computer as the rest of them slumped round the table in the centre of the room.

Michelle brought out biscuits and made coffee for the adults, and there was some Pepsi Max left in the mini fridge which she poured for Ellie, Chelsy and Finley.

Peter brought up the CCTV on the computer screen. Finley was glued to it. Chelsy didn't want to watch, but Ellie couldn't help herself.

The picture was grey and grainy. She watched herself and Chels and Fin run down the stairs, to her mum, and then Aunt Cathy ran down after them.

Aunt Cathy, she thought. If it really was her (Ellie didn't know *what* to believe anymore).

And then there was the bright flash from the particle accelerator. For a couple of moments the screen was completely white. Then the glow faded and Ellie was on her butt, shielding her eyes with her arms. And then Peter and Christopher were running to and fro, fiddling with the terminals.

And then the black portal appeared, like a blot of black slime. But nothing else did. No shadows. Christopher Orange fell flat on his back, clutching his chest, apparently for no reason.

And then the monster came...

Except it didn't.

They were all shrieking, and Aunt Cathy screamed and ran back up the stairs and was God-knows-where right now. But nothing had come out of the portal.

Nothing that the camera picked up, anyway.

"Are we all mad?" Michelle Orange asked.

Peter closed the CCTV window with a sigh. "It's there. We all saw it. I don't know why the cameras can't pick it up. If our eyes can see it there's no scientific reason why the cameras can't."

"Well, there's nothing on them." Christopher sighed and ate a biscuit, dipping it into his coffee. "But the monster *is* there."

For a moment no one said anything.

Peter broke the silence by sighing loudly, rising from his chair and saying, "I'm going to the toilet."

He disappeared out into the corridor.

Mr and Mrs Orange looked at each other for a long time.

"You sure you're okay?" Michelle asked.

Christopher nodded. "Yes, Mish." And he tried a smile. "Are you?"

She laughed. "I honestly don't know."

He nodded, and then looked at Ellie. "El?"

Ellie shrugged, and then said, "I'm scared."

Her mother leant over and squeezed her knee. "I know, Darling, I am too." And then she squeezed Chelsy's shoulder. "We all are."

"I'm not," said Finley. "Not one bit."

Peter came back. He didn't say a word, just sat back down in his chair.

"I think we need to call the police," Michelle said eventually. "It'll be passed upwards, obviously, to whoever deals with... whatever this is."

"The police," Christopher tutted.

"Who else? We were given a *grant*, Christopher. That's it. We don't work for MI5, or Interpol, or the FBI. We work for ourselves. There's only us. And they'll need to do all kinds of tests on it. See whether it's carbon-based. Whether it has a similar anatomy. We don't even know whether it *bleeds*."

Ellie remembered the thick black ichor dripping from it and shivered.

After a moment, Peter said, "They'll want us to tell them where it came from." He was staring off into the carpet as he spoke.

Christopher scoffed. "Who knows. Some other dimension."

"They'll want us to open the portal again." Michelle rubbed her face. Ellie didn't think she'd touched her coffee.

Ellie had only sipped her Pepsi Max twice. Her stomach was a ball.

"Do we even know if we can do it again?"

"If we use the same velocity, the same power, the same spin, the same mass..." Christopher shrugged. "It should work, shouldn't it? And all the inputs are stored on the terminals, so there's no reason why we can't do it."

Ellie didn't feel like it was her place to speak up, but she couldn't not. "Don't open that portal again," she said. "You're not seriously thinking about it, are you?"

The adults looked at each other, but before they could answer, they saw headlights flash across the window. A car was pulling into the car park.

It was Alina.

*

"I got your voicemail! What's going on?"

Alina Sharma was Nepalese. Nepal is a small country north of India. Ellie knew that because she'd looked it up.

"What about Ita's engagement party?" Michelle asked.

Ita was Alina's daughter.

"Ah, it was coming to an end anyway," Alina said.

"It's only ten past eight."

Alina flapped a hand. "I see my daughter anytime. You said you had made a breakthrough? I came as soon as I picked up your message."

Christopher and Peter and Michelle looked at each other.

Alina noticed Chelsy, Finley and Ellie and said, "Oh, hi guys," with a curious expression. "Is it take your kids to work day?"

Michelle stood up, ignoring the remark. "Alina... what you're about to see... Well. Just prepare yourself, okay?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you," said Christopher.

They left the office, Christopher first, then Alina, then the two girls and Finley, then Michelle close behind them, and lastly Peter at the back.

Christopher stopped outside the door down to the lab and said, "After you."

Alina looked at him strangely, then they all followed her down the clanking metal stairs.

The monster was still sprawled out on the floor, but it had started to degrade already. It was flatter than it had been, if you can imagine that, as if it had been sucked in on itself. Many of its fangs had fallen out of its head, but they didn't seem to be on the floor. It was as if they'd disintegrated or something.

Ellie felt her mum squeeze her shoulders.

Alina walked all the way down the stairs without saying a word nor breaking her stride. She was staring at the monster the whole time.

That's what Ellie thought, anyway.

It looked like she was going to walk right up to the monster's body, and Christopher said, "Be careful of it!"

Then Alina replied, "Be careful of what? What am I looking for?"

Michelle gasped.

Oh my gosh, she can't see it, Ellie realised.

And that's when Alina tripped over the monster's huge claw.

She screamed, and stumbled forward, throwing out her arms as she went down, down, right *on top* of the monster. She landed on its neck and shoulder, and the thing burst under her like a paper bag, barely cushioning her fall at all.

Those on the stairs cried out - "Alina!" - as she got covered in a spray of black ichor.

Christopher hurried down the stairs, running to help her, and then he stopped, thinking better of it.

"What did I trip over?" Alina asked, staring at the monster's claw, but obviously only seeing the flat concrete. "Ugh... I feel cold..." And she rubbed at her arm, the one covered in the black goo, rubbing it deeper into her cardigan.

The ichor was splashed all over the right side of her body, and also on her face.

"Come on, you three," Michelle said, grabbing Ellie and Finley and Chelsy by the arms. "Back upstairs, *now*."

"Aw, *Mum*..."

"*Now*, Finley. Do as you're told."

Ellie couldn't stop staring. When Chelsy turned round there were tears on her cheeks and she was shaking.

"Christopher," Michelle called, "I'm taking the kids back upstairs. You be careful, okay? Don't get any on you."

Alina had climbed back to her feet, looking like she'd fallen in a puddle of oil. "What's going on, here?" she asked, reaching out with a

hand. "The air here, in front of the particle accelerator... it *feels* different. Colder, obviously, but also *thicker*..."

Her hand brushed the monster's head, and it sunk forward, its jaw collapsing, and a flurry of eyes cascaded to the floor like marbles but burst like berries and then dissipated on the air like dust.

Chapter Six:
Destroying The Evidence

"I've convinced her to shower and dispose of her clothes," Michelle said, holding up a large bin bag, which presumably held Alina's clothes.

The rest of them were sat round the large table again in the office upstairs. More coffee. More Pepsi Max. More biscuits.

There were showers next to the toilets at OSS - and this isn't unusual for laboratories, okay, before you go *'Oh that's convenient'*.

Alina must have been showering off all that black monster ichor, not that she knew she'd been splashed with it.

"What did you tell her?" Christopher asked.

"That something weird had happened to the particle accelerator. That the readings were off the chart, and there was a small possibility she might have been contaminated with radiation."

"You didn't tell her about the portals?"

"No, of course not."

There was a moment's silence. Then Christopher said, "She couldn't see it."

It was obvious, of course. It didn't need saying, and yet it *did* need saying at the same time, because apparently the six of them could see things other people could not. Things that even cameras couldn't pick up.

Things that weren't there?

"Did you see what happened? The monster just... just crumpled..."

"It had already started degrading."

"Yes, I noticed too, when we were coming down the stairs."

"And that black stuff - what was it?"

"I don't know."

"It went on her *face*."

"I know."

Ellie and Chelsy sat silently, but they remembered it all. They'd seen it all.

Even Finley was silent.

Then Michelle sighed. She held up the bag. "This needs incinerating. And I'm going to go and get her a change of my clothes from the house."

She was gone for ten minutes, and during that time neither Ellie, Chelsy, Finley, nor their dads said one word. They just sat there and

stared down into their mugs or glasses, and every now and then someone would take a sip and that would be the only sound.

Michelle came back, and that was a relief, because Ellie felt that tension had been building in that office and she didn't quite know why.

"I'm just going to hand these to Alina." She held up the folded-up sandwich of clothes and headed off to the showers.

She and Alina returned together. Alina looked annoyed about having to shower and her clothes being burnt, but at least there was no longer any black splatters on her face and hands.

"Michelle was telling me," Alina said, "that there were readings. Exciting readings. And then the particle accelerator powered itself down?"

"Yes," Michelle jumped in quickly, looking first at her husband and then at Peter. "We thought we were going to make a breakthrough, finally. That's when I called you, Alina. But then it shut off, didn't it, Christopher."

Christopher said, "Oh yes."

"And we were left with these strange readings in front of the accelerator, in the air..."

"Hmm," said Alina. "And you let me walk right into it."

No, not pleased at all.

"Y-you tripped," Michelle said. "Is your arm okay?"

"It's not, actually." And Alina rubbed her right wrist, which she'd thrown out to break her fall. That hand had gone right through the shoulder of that invisible monster. Had popped it like a balloon.

"Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

Why did her mum keep asking to take people to the hospital?

"No," said Alina. "It's not broken. But I don't really know why I've come. I thought you said there had been a breakthrough."

"We thought there was," Michelle said. Then she looked at the two men and prompted them with, "Didn't we."

"Oh yes," said Christopher.

"A breakthrough," said Peter.

"Then it shut itself down," added Christopher, to show he'd been listening to his wife's story. "The accelerator. Just when we thought we were getting somewhere."

"Is that why you're sitting there looking like someone died?" Alina raised her eyebrows at them all. Then her eyes rested on Ellie and Chelsy and she said, "You two girls - you should be happy. You have no worries. It's nearly the summer."

Ellie looked up and managed to smile. Chelsy caught her eye then gave a small laugh.

You have no worries.

Lady, you don't know Jack.

Ellie didn't know who Jack was - it was just something people said for some reason.

"We're just disappointed," said Christopher. "It had so much promise tonight. We thought this was going to be the one."

"Do you want to run the numbers again?" asked Alina, and everyone said *"No!"*, even the girls, who surely shouldn't have a say.

"The particle accelerator needs to rest for a few hours."

"Rest?"

"Cool down," said Michelle. "And we all do too, to be honest. It's been a long evening. Look, I'm sorry to have made you come down here for nothing."

Alina sighed. "No, that's alright. I have the day off tomorrow, though, if you remember. I'm wedding dress shopping with Ita."

With everything going on Michelle *had* forgotten, but Alina being out of the lab tomorrow was a good thing.

"I will wash your clothes and bring them back on Thursday," Alina said, making for the office door. "Night night."

"Night. Sorry about your clothes!"

Alina left. They waited until they saw her car headlights strobe past the window before speaking again.

"This changes everything," Michelle said. "If she can't see it does that mean no one else can see it? Are we the only ones?"

She wanted an answer, but the men just shrugged and made strange non-committal noises in their throats.

"We just don't know, Mish," said Peter. "Maybe. Maybe something happened to us. To all of us." And he looked straight at Chelsy with a strange, forlorn expression.

"If we tell the government or whoever, what will they find? Nothing. They'll find nothing. We have no evidence. And they'll want us to open the portal again. They don't know what's on the other side. They don't know what could be unleashed - can you imagine invisible monsters running around?"

Ellie felt her stomach twist at that. Invisible monsters running around. How do you protect yourself from something you can't see?

"So we can't open the portal," Christopher agreed. "Fine. We'll abandon the project."

Peter stared at him, "Just like that?"

Christopher shrugged. "We can *pretend* to keep looking, I guess, until the grant money runs out."

"And then what? What do we do then?"

Christopher shrugged again, like shrugging was his hobby. "Something else, I guess. Something that won't be a danger to the whole world."

Peter sat back and sighed. "And Alina?"

"We know what we did to open the portal," Michelle said. "We just need to make sure we don't do that again."

"So we need to make sure *Alina* doesn't do it."

"How?"

"I don't know yet," Christopher chuckled, rubbing his face. "We need to delete the CCTV. And we need to delete today's entry history on the computers, so no one can find out what the correct velocity, spin, mass and all that is required to open the portal."

"I'll stay with the children," Michelle said, "You two go and sort that."

The dads were gone fifteen minutes, and when they returned they said, "Done. There's no evidence left on the servers. And the monster? It's basically disappeared. It's as if it's dissolving into thin air."

Chapter Seven:
Nothing Makes Sense And We're All Scared

Finley said he was fine on his own, but Chelsy and Ellie didn't want to sleep alone.

Not that surprising.

They persuaded the adults to let them both sleep in Ellie's room. They'd never had a sleepover on a school night before, but this was no ordinary school night. And plus neither of them expected to be going to school tomorrow, quite honestly. They'd done their SATs; the year was almost over. All they had left was their end of school show the following week (which was Hansel and Gretel, if you're interested).

"Why don't you stay over, too, Pete," Michelle said as she locked up the OSS lab. "Cath is in the guest bedroom, but there's a sofa bed in the study we can make up. I'm sure Chelsy would like it if you were here."

Chesly agreed that she would.

"I can't leave Rex." The sausage dog.

"Oh just bring him," Christopher said. He was looking up into the sky, as if searching for the winged shadows that had escaped from the portal. "He's house-trained, isn't he."

"He is."

"Can he sleep in my room?" Ellie said, "With us?"

Michelle would normally have said no - she'd never had a dog and never wanted one. And plus, didn't they malt, dachshunds? (Dachshund is the proper name for a sausage dog). She didn't know, but they looked the type, didn't they.

Even when the country had locked down four years ago and everyone seemed to be getting dogs she'd resisted, despite Ellie's best efforts at persuasion.

One of the school mums had spent three thousand pounds on a *cockapoo*, which Michelle thought was just a posh mongrel, although she had to admit it was very cute.

But the girls had just seen a monster from another dimension get sliced in half, so she decided the least she could do was let Rex keep them company tonight. "Yes, okay," she sighed. "But not on the bed, okay?"

"Okay," Ellie said, exchanging a small smile with Chelsy.

So Peter drove home whilst the others trudged back to the Victorian house.

"Why is the lounge window open so wide?" Christopher asked, as he unlocked the front door.

Because Aunt Cathy climbed out of it like a burglar, thought Ellie. She didn't say it, though. It sounded too absurd.

"Cath?" her dad called. "Are you here?"

There was no reply.

Ellie shivered, despite the warm evening. It was nearly nine o'clock and the sun hadn't even set yet.

"Cath?" Michelle called, looking in the kitchen whilst Christopher headed up the stairs, calling her name again.

He came down a minute later, shaking his head. "She's not here."

"She saw what happened down in the lab, though, right?" Michelle said. "Saw the portal, and the monster. And then she ran off."

"It wasn't Aunt Cathy, though," Ellie said quietly. "I know it sounds stupid, but the *real* Aunt Cathy phoned the house. She's still in Canada. That's why I got freaked out and ran to you."

Christopher and Michelle exchanged glances. "But that... that doesn't make any sense, Ellie," her mother said.

"I'm not saying it does. I'm just saying what happened."

Her parents didn't know what to say.

Eventually Christopher shrugged. "You could try phoning your sister. Her house, I mean. What time is it in Canada?"

"I think she's five hours behind. So what's that - about four o' clock in the afternoon?" Michelle was already reaching for the landline (cheaper than phoning from a mobile, Ellie guessed), and she dialled and put the phone to her ear.

Ellie's tummy turned over and over as she heard the faint *brrr brrr* through the speaker.

The seconds stretched like elastic.

C'mon... Ellie bit her lower lip, willing her aunt to answer.

Then there was a click... and the answer phone kicked in.

Michelle looked at her as she put the phone down, but her expression was hard to read.

"Mum..." Ellie said, suddenly very angry, as if they didn't believe her even though everything she'd said had been *true*. "That doesn't mean anything... she could be at the shops, or having her hair done, or anything..."

"Yes, Honey, I promise, I'll try again later, okay?" She gripped Ellie's hand tight, which had started to tap on the worktop. "Don't worry about it."

Don't worry about it?

There were monsters and portals and fake aunts and she shouldn't be *worried about it?*

Eleanor Orange was *very* worried.

But so were the adults. She had seen it in their faces, back at the lab and now here as well. They didn't know what to do.

Peter arrived with a small overnight bag and Rex on lead, who yapped furiously and covered Chelsy in slobbering kisses.

Then Michelle made a huge show of taking the girls up to Ellie's room and checking under the bed, and in her closet, and behind the curtains, and anywhere else a monster might be hiding.

Then she rolled out a sleeping bag on the chaise longue at the foot of Ellie's bed, told them that the adults still had a lot of talking to do and that they should try not to be scared.

So just remember everyone, if you see a terrifying monster from another dimension, all you need to do is try not to be scared, alright?

Adults talk so much rubbish sometimes.

When she'd gone Rex jumped on Ellie's bed and curled up there.

The girls got ready for bed, knowing that they'd never sleep, not tonight.

And when Ellie took off the purple scrunchie on her left wrist and put it on her bedside table, she found a red mark blistered on her skin in the shape of a star.

*

"Chelsy, are you asleep?"

"No. Are you?"

Ellie giggled despite herself. "Yes, I am snoring." The room had finally got dark. It was after ten o'clock now, according to her alarm clock. "Your dog is taking up most of the bed."

"He does that," Chelsy said.

"How can something so small take up so much space?"

"I think he has magic powers."

"Ah, right. That'll be it."

They were silent for a few minutes. Then Chelsy said, "Ellie? Are you sure it was your aunt on the phone?"

"Yes. Positive."

"Then the person staying in your house this past week was not your aunt."

Ellie swallowed. "Yeah."

"But she looked like her and sounded like her."

"Yes."

"And your Aunt Cathy doesn't have a twin?"

Ellie sniffed. "Not that we know of."

"Okay." Chelsy said nothing for a moment. Then: "Did you hear what she said, the thing pretending to be your aunt? When the portal was opening?"

"Turn it off."

"Not that. Before. After that bright light. She... she said something about the Angel Fire."

Ellie remembered.

This is how it happens... The Angel Fire...

"What do you think that means, Ellie? What's the Angel Fire?"

"I don't know." Ellie couldn't make sense of anything that had happened. Hardly surprising. Her parents didn't know either, and it was their experiment.

"Ellie?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you think we have to go to school tomorrow?"

"I hope not."

"We can't tell anyone, can we. About any of it. The portal. The monster. Your aunt being a weird what's-it-called? A doppo... doppy... " The word she was groping for was *doppelganger*, but she couldn't quit remember it, so she settled with "imposter" instead.

Ellie gave a snort. "Who would believe us, Chels?"

She hardly believed it herself. She thought she was going mad.

After a little while, Chesly said, "You don't think they're ever going to open the portal again, do you?"

"After what came out of it? No way."

"Well what happens if someone else opens it... some other scientists in America or something, and those monsters come out and start killing everyone, and no one can even *see* them?"

Ellie thought of the massive thing with fangs on its head and she shuddered. Then she said, "*We* can see them."

"No one else can."

"We don't know that. We only know that Alina couldn't see it."

"And the cameras."

"Oh yeah." Ellie had forgotten that. The monster hadn't shown up on their phones, nor on the CCTV. And the flying shadow things hadn't

shown up on the CCTV either. Had they been real? Or were they just shadows?

If they were real - if they were truly monsters from another dimension - they had escaped the lab and flown off. It didn't bare thinking about.

Amazingly, the girls did sleep eventually. But it was broken, disrupted sleep, full of portals and monsters and dripping ink-black ichor.

And then, at four in the morning, Ellie dreamed of fairies.

There were two of them, sitting on her window sill in the gap between the curtains. They were each about the size of a banana and gave off a soft golden glow, which was reflected by the dark glass.

"There she is!" one of the fairies squeaked.

"Which one?" said the other.

"The one in the bed."

"She's awfully hairy. And smaller than I imagined."

"That's a *dog*, Feather. I'm talking about the *girl*."

"Oh yes!" said the fairy that must have been called Feather. "The girl! It is her!" And in her excitement she knocked off a plastic toy, and it clunked against the radiator on the way to the floor.

Ellie sat up straight, gasping.

The fairies weren't there, of course, because fairies aren't real. But the toy *was* on the floor. It must have rolled off, blown by the wind. The window *was* open, after all.

What Ellie didn't see were the two fairies flying off into the night, one of them saying to the other, "Feather, you are such a clutz."

*

The sun came up early. It was July, so Ellie's room was light at half five, even with the blackout curtains.

Wednesday.

The girls both decided to go to school, coming to the conclusion that the distraction would actually be helpful.

There was just over a week before the summer holidays. And then: secondary school. Peddleton Village didn't have a secondary school; they'd have to catch the bus to King John's in town.

But that was a different worry for a different day.

Ellie had enough on her mind without the nervous anticipation of Year 7 approaching.

At the breakfast table, Michelle said, "We have decided what we are going to do."

"Which is?"

"Nothing," Christopher said. "We're going to forget all about what we saw. We're not going to tell anyone, we're not going to repeat the experiment - we're going to use the particle accelerator for studying radiation and isotopes from now on."

"No more wormholes," Peter added, drinking an orange juice and ruffling Chelsy's hair. "Good morning, Chihuahua."

A Chihuahua is a type of little dog with hardly any fur (it's pronounced *chi-wow-wa*). For as long as Ellie had known Chelsy, which was ever since Reception, her dad had called her *Chelsy Chihuahua* as a pet name (*literally* a pet name, *ha ha*).

Peter swore it was only because the two words start with the same sound, and not because he thought his daughter looked like a tiny hairless dog.

"What about Mrs Sharma?" said Chelsy.

"Alina won't like it," Michelle said with a sigh. "She won't understand, of course. I don't want to fall out with her."

"If worse comes to worse we can try and buy her out," said Christopher. "Just be OS. Orange & Stiddin. Or SO." He gave a chuckle. "And then there's your Aunt Cathy. She might shout about it to everyone who'll listen, but who'll believe her?"

Ellie bit her lip and stared into the goop of soggy cereal she'd barely touched.

Peter finished his orange juice. "I went back down to the lab this morning, girls. There's nothing there. Whatever that thing was... it's dead and gone, okay? You've got nothing to be scared of."

"Except those shadow things that flew out first," Chelsy said. She too had barely touched her cereal. She was keeping busy shooting a hair bobble at the wall.

It was probably annoying all the adults but none of them told her to stop it.

Christopher cleared his throat. "The, er, shadow things... well, we were talking, and they may just have been shadows."

Chelsy stopped mid-twang. She looked at Ellie and then back to the adults. "You're joking."

"Well we don't really know *what* we saw," said Michelle. "In times of stress the mind can play tricks on us. Oh, morning Finley. You okay?"

Finley had walked in, wearing just his pyjama bottoms. He yawned and patted his bare chest. "Yeah."

Ellie pulled a face.

Finley saw the girls in their school uniforms and frowned. "You're going to *school* today?"

"Yes? Aren't you?"

Finley sighed, scooting next to his sister at the breakfast bar and reaching for the cereal. "No. I am too scared after yesterday."

"You don't look scared. You just want to play video games all day."

Finley sighed. "*Muumm*, tell Ellie I'm too scared to go to school."

"Finley can stay at home today if he wants," said Michelle, irritated at their arguing. "Just like you girls could have if you'd wanted."

Well, she *guessed* that sounded fair.

"Fin," Ellie said. "You saw the shadows come out of the portal, right? Before the monster came."

Finley was pouring honey cornflakes into a bowl. "Mmm," he said. "I think so."

"Finley doesn't know *what* he saw," said Michelle.

"*What?"* Ellie glared at her. "That's rubbish!"

"Don't be rude to your mum, Ellie," said Christopher, pouring a coffee.

"But it wasn't a trick! They were *things*, right? And we all saw them."

"We all saw *shadows*. You even described them as shadows."

"Yes but they were not *just* shadows!"

"How do you know?"

Ellie didn't know what to say to that. She irritably twisted her purple scrunchie into her hair and stood up. "We're going to be late."

"You sure you're both okay to go in?"

"Yeah. As you said, nothing happened, did it, so everything's fine. Come on, Chels." She left the kitchen, hearing Chelsy follow her.

Ellie felt bad talking to her parents like that, but what had they expected?

"And they don't believe me about Aunt Cathy, either," she said to Chelsy as they made their way down the drive. "They just think I'm a stupid kid."

"They're scared," Chelsy said.

But they were all scared.

And as they walked to school both girls were sure they were being watched, although neither said anything out loud.

Chapter Eight:
And Now They Meet Some Other Things

Peddleton Primary was small - less than three hundred pupils - and the Year 5s and 6s were mixed in one class of thirty-three.

In every book Ellie had read about school there was always a class bully.

But not at Peddleton. Their class was lucky like that, she guessed.

The only trouble Ellie remembered had come last year when Miss Carty had married a woman, and someone's granddad had kicked up a fuss with the PTA (he had been told in no uncertain terms to mind his own business).

Of course, with a last name like *Orange*, you were bound to get made fun of every now and then. Getting called *Juice*, or *Apple*, or being asked if your dad was in *Take That!,* whoever they were.

And Chelsy had a strange last name too - Stiddin - but the worst she got called was *Chelsy Stoodin*, or *Chelsy Stoodin Poo*.

But now they were both in Year 6 they just got called Ellie and Chelsy.

They had maths and English before lunch, as usual, because kids were supposedly able to concentrate best in the mornings (although this morning Ellie and Chelsy weren't able to concentrate very much at all).

It may well be that every school in Britain has maths and English in the morning - does yours?

The day was dragging, but finally the lunch bell rang, and Year 5 and 6 lined up in the dining hall with their little plastic trays.

Then they reached the cutlery trolley, and a squeaky voice said, *"It's her!"*

"Ssh!" said another voice. *"She'll hear you, remember!"*

"She never has before..."

Ellie and Chelsy looked at each other, startled. "*Did you hear that?*" Ellie hissed.

And one of the squeaky voices said, *"She **can** hear us!"*

Chelsy drew in a sharp breath. "A-are the spoons talking to us?" she whispered.

And that's when the two fairies flew out from behind the cutlery rack. To be more precise, one of the fairies flew out, squeaking, "*Heeellloooooo*," and the other fairy chased her, snapping, "*No!"* and "*Get back here!"*

This won't surprise you, but Ellie and Chelsy both screamed.

The fairies flew around their heads, one chasing the other, shouting at her.

None of the other children in the dining hall could see the fairies, of course, and someone decided that the girls must be flapping their hands and screaming at a wasp. This set off the rest of the dinner queue, and soon all the children were screaming and flapping their hands.

Eventually the fairies were scared off with all the flapping and screaming, and Ellie and Chelsy calmed down.

"Where is it?" asked the girl in front of them. "Has it gone?"

"Yes, it's gone," said Ellie, her heart pounding, fanning her face with her hands.

The boy behind them swore he'd seen this non-existent wasp and was going to impale it on his fork. "I nearly got it," he said gleefully to the other boys, thrusting his fork in the air.

When the commotion was over and Ellie and Chelsy had sat with their food at an empty table, Chelsy leant in close and said, "You did see them too, right?"

"Yes," said Ellie.

"They were *glowing*."

"I know. And I think there were two more in my room last night."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just thought it was a dream..." Ellie couldn't remember what those two had been talking about... perhaps Rex the dog?

"No one else can see them."

"I know."

"Were... were they *fairies*?" Chelsy whispered the word so quietly Ellie basically had to lip read it.

And then, and neither of the girls would be able to tell you why - they both started *giggling*. Hysterically.

"*I think they were!*" Ellie said.

Fairies! Fairies in Peddleton Primary, and only Eleanor Orange and Chelsy Stiddin could see them.

Somehow, the fact that fairies were real kind of made everything a bit better. Sure, that monster with fangs on its head was horrific, and it scared them witless to think that such things existed in other dimensions, but fairies existed here on *Earth*.

And they were small and cute, and they glowed gold, and they spoke English.

It's her...

That's what one of them had said, as if she was famous, or their queen, and Ellie just had a wild thought - maybe she was really a fairy queen - and it sent her tummy all funny.

Every time Ellie and Chelsy looked at each other that afternoon they started giggling. They were supposed to be painting the scenery for their end of year production, which was Hansel and Gretel, and their teacher eventually told them off and gave them some work sheets to do instead.

They walked home with their eyes to the skies, looking for more of the golden orbs.

"What do you think they eat?" Chelsy was saying. "Where do they live? Like, do they live in nests?"

"Nests?" Ellie asked.

"Yes, you know, in trees."

"Dunno. You can ask one next time we see one."

"Did you hear what they were saying? Behind the cutlery?"

"Yeah - one of them said *'She'll hear us'*, and the other said *'She hasn't before'*."

"Who do you think they were talking about?"

Chelsy, of course, thought it must have been her, because she was closest to the cutlery rack, whereas Ellie was confident it was *her*, because she was their queen.

"Well we could *both* hear and see them," said Ellie diplomatically.

"Something must have happened to us last night. And now we can see these creatures that are invisible to everyone else."

"That sounds..." Ellie didn't finish. Something had caught her eye, and she turned her head in the direction of the woodland to the side of the road. The long grass rustled. There was a two-foot high hedgerow running along the path, and bobbing along just above it was what looked like an upside down *ice-cream cone*.

Except it was green.

Ellie's mouth fell open (in surprise, not because she thought it *was* an ice cream and wanted to eat it).

The green ice-cream cone reached the end of the hedgerow. A *body* appeared from behind the foliage with the upside down ice cream on its shoulders. It took Ellie a moment to realise that the upside down ice cream was actually a head wearing a very pointy hat.

"Oh. My. God."

It was a little green man.

His skin was green, like an under-ripe banana. And his clothes were green too.

He started whistling merrily and headed deeper into the wood.

Ellie gripped Chelsy's arm and pointed. She tried to work her mouth but no sound came out.

Chelsy just stared for a long moment and then said, "What. The hell. Is that..."

They watched him disappear into the trees, not knowing what to do.

Then they looked at each other, and in a telepathic moment both agreed they should follow him.

The little man's whistle was probably high enough to break glass, and they were able to follow the hideous sound through the trees and catch sight of him again.

He was in a clearing, bending over to pick up a few fallen apples. He tried to juggle with them, oblivious to their approach. Then he dropped one of the apples on his foot, yelled in pain, brought his leg up and accidentally kneed himself in the head. He fell to the ground and began writhing about.

And then he stopped and looked up.

There was a moment's silence. The two girls stared at the creature.

The creature stared back.

"Uuh…" said the little man, looking from one to the other.

"Holy Moly," said Ellie.

He tried to crawl into the foliage, making little whimpering sounds.

"What in the world are you?" Chelsy asked.

This was quite a derogatory question. The creature squealed again, pulled himself into a ball and tried to hide under his hat. "Don't look at me!" he yelled.

If you're a strange little creature and don't want people to look at you, saying *'don't look at me'* is probably the only way of making doubly sure that everyone looks at you.

"Oh, they told me I should be careful!" The creature was quivering. He slowly lifted his head and looked at them. His eyes were big and green like cooking apples. "I be so stupid!"

Chelsy and Ellie exchanged glances again.

"H-hey," Ellie said, "don't say that... I'm sure you're not stupid..."

Suddenly the little green creature bounded to his feet and bellowed, "You're dreaming! This is all a dream…" He waved his hands about in a manner he deemed most manipulative. "I'm not really a wood elf and you can't really see me! I am a figment of your imagination!"

"But," said Chelsy, "we *can* see you. We can *obviously* see you."

"Ah!" screamed the little green man, which must have been a wood elf, whatever that is.

Then he turned and ran, diving into the foliage and disappearing out of sight.

Chapter Nine:
I *Told* You!

"This is nuts," said Chelsy, and she was right, it was. "There was a wood elf in the trees and two fairies in the cutlery rack, and no one can see them but us."

"I bet your dad and my mum and dad and Finley can see them," said Ellie. "Whatever happened to us last night happened to them too."

"We should ask them."

"Ask them what? Oh by the way, have you seen any fairies today?"

"Yes. Or a wood elf."

Ellie laughed. They carried on walking home, satisfied they'd seen all they could of the little green man today. "I hope mermaids are real."

"I wanted to be a mermaid when I was little."

"I know. Do you remember when we were in Tenerife one year and you had that purple swimming costume with a mermaid's tail on it, and you kept tripping up?"

Chelsy said that she did indeed remember that.

When they got back to the Victorian house no one was home. Just Rex, who had been shut in the kitchen and greeted them like they'd been away for years.

The grown-ups must have been working in the lab - they usually were at this time.

But then where was Finley? When he hadn't answered their calls Ellie had stuck her head in his room just to make sure he wasn't dead, but he wasn't home either.

"Would he have gone to the lab with them?" Chelsy asked. "Should we check?"

Ellie pursed her lips. "I'm not sure... I don't know whether I want to go back in the lab, to be honest. Maybe ever again."

"The monster's gone. Dad said so. And Alina's not in today - I think she said she was going dress shopping with Ita, or something."

That was true, so they headed across the gardens to the laboratory, both on the lookout for any fantastical creatures that might be hiding in the grass.

Ellie didn't know whether to feel relieved or worried when they found the lab doors locked.

"Where are they?"

They headed back to the house. Ellie was just about to call her mum when they heard tyres crunching on patio stone and a car engine turning off.

Christopher, Michelle, Finley and Peter walked in, all looking a little flustered.

"Oh girls," Michelle said, "I'm sorry - we hoped we'd beat you home."

"What's happened?"

Christopher gave a sheepish laugh. "I was just causing a commotion," he said. "Woah, boy," he said to Rex, who was bounding about for attention.

"We had to take Dad to hospital," said Finley.

Panic erupted on Ellie's face. "What? Why?"

"There's nothing to worry about," Christopher said quickly. "I'm fine. I just had bad chest pains and my pulse was really quick."

"We thought he was having a heart attack," said Michelle.

"But I wasn't," Christopher said quickly. "I had an ECG at the hospital and it wasn't a heart attack."

"Then what..."

"The doctor said it could have been anxiety, or a panic attack. She asked if I'd been through a lot of stress recently." And he chuckled.

Ellie and Chelsy exchanged glances. "You didn't tell her what happened, did you?"

"What, about the monster? No, Pumpkin. I don't think they'd have let me home if I had, do you? I just told her work had been very stressful."

"Which is true," said Peter with a wry smile. He had scooped Rex up and the little dachshund was licking his chin.

"...And they gave me something to slow my heart rate and when it finally came back to normal they let me home."

"I had to *force* your father to go," said Michelle sternly. "You know what he's like."

"Well I was right, wasn't I? There was nothing wrong with me."

"They said we should have called an ambulance."

Christopher made a disparaging noise. "Ehhh. All's well that ends well."

The girls wanted to tell them all about the fairies and the wood elf, but with everything going on the chance just kind of slipped them by. Michelle was constantly fussing over Christopher, who kept insisting he was fine. *"You are **not** fine,"* Michelle would reply. *"You need to rest."*

Eventually Peter said, "You might as well just put your feet up, mate - it's not like we've got any work to do."

Lol.

Finley whispered to the girls on his way upstairs, "My DS ran out of charge. I was *sooooo* bored."

The girls went up to Ellie's room to watch TV for a bit. Ellie had been hoping there would be fairies dancing on her pillow, but alas, there were none.

They took Rex on a quick walk with Peter before tea. Several times Chelsy looked like she wanted to tell him about the little creatures they'd seen - she even said, "*Dad*..." a couple of times, but she lost her nerve. Of course, it would have been helpful if there had been another wood elf in the bushes or something - the girls were certain their parents would be able to see the creatures too - but they saw nothing (and believe me, they looked).

And then when they got back home they found Christopher and Michelle in the living room, both of them looking quite pale.

"What's happened now?" Peter asked. "Are you both okay?"

Michelle swallowed. She was plucking at the dyed ginger streaks in her hair. She looked at Ellie. "You were right all along, El. Aunt Cathy phoned me back. She's been in Canada this whole time."

*

Ellie felt no triumph at this news. She just felt a bit sick.

"How does this make any sense?" Christopher said. "She looked just like your sister. She sounded just like her."

"And it can't be anything to do with our experiment," Michelle said, "because Aunt Cathy was here for a *whole week*. We only opened the portals last night."

"What did Aunt Cathy say?" Ellie asked. "The real Aunt Cathy, I mean."

"She must have thought I was mad... I kept asking her, *Are you sure you didn't visit? Are you* ***sure***... And she was like, *Y-yes. Quite sure*." Michelle was pacing back and forth, her socks pit-pat-padding on the polished wooden floor. "How could this happen? What rational explanation could there be?" She stopped. "Does she have a twin that we don't know about?"

And Christopher said, "Mish, she's your sister. I think you'd have noticed when you were growing up."

"Okay... So either she *was* the real Cath, and the woman on the phone is a doppelganger," (she remembered the word), "or the woman on the

phone is the real Cath, and the one we had staying here is the doppelganger."

"She could have caught a plane last night," Peter offered. "Arrived back in Canada this morning. And is just playing a really weird trick for some reason..."

"She rang yesterday afternoon," Ellie said in a small voice. "She rang from Canada when she was *literally* sat in the lounge over there," and she pointed to the place on the sofa. "That's why we ran down to the lab."

"Do we call the police?" Christopher asked.

Michelle scoffed, "And say what?"

"I don't know."

Chelsy said, "I think the Aunt Cathy staying here was the fake one. And I think it probably does have something to do with your experiments." She looked at Ellie. "She said something yesterday, when she saw the particle accelerator."

"Oh yes," Ellie agreed. "You were off phoning Alina, Mum. She said... '*This is how it happens... The Angel Fire*'." She looked at Chelsy for agreement, who nodded.

The adults all looked at each other.

"She was talking about our experiment?" Peter asked.

"Yes."

And Chelsy said, "What's Angel Fire?"

No one knew.

But given that it's in the title of this book you will have probably realised it's a bit important.

It might have been a good time to mention the fairies and the wood elf, but the adults seemed to be having a hard time digesting the news about Aunt Cathy not being Aunt Cathy, and the Angel Fire, whatever that was.

Ellie promised herself the next time she saw one of the fantastical creatures she'd ask them about it.

After dinner, Ellie told Chelsy they should try and find a wood elf and ask him about the Angel Fire, and so they went scouring the woods around the house. They found nothing. Once, Chelsy thought she heard something, and ran after a rustle in the bushes, but it just turned out to be a squirrel.

So they started calling out - "Here, elfy elfy..." - and making kissing sounds like you might do to get a dog to come to you.

"You know," Ellie said eventually, "I think they're *hiding* from us."

"Why?"

"Because the one we saw earlier - he tried to pretend he wasn't there. He didn't want us to see him. And he said *'They told me to be careful'*. So I think he wasn't meant to let us see him. And the fairies earlier. One of them said *'She'll hear us, remember'*, and the other one said *'She hasn't before.*' So I think something happened to us in the lab last night, and now we can see these things, and they must know about it. The creatures know we can see them now, and so they've been told to be careful."

"So they've always been here, it's just that they're invisible to everyone."

"Yes, except last night there was that flash of light and now we can see them. And look - the flash of light *burnt* me." Ellie held out her arm and rolled aside the purple scrunchie. The small, red, seven-pointed star was like a child might draw.

"Ouch," Chelsy said. "That's from the flash?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"No. It feels cold."

"Have you told your mum and dad?"

Ellie shook her head. "No. I think they have enough on their minds. They already feel guilty enough as it is."

They gave up looking for the wood elves and headed back to the house.

Christopher, Michelle and Peter were in the kitchen, talking. They had opened a bottle of Baileys, which was like milk but for adults.

Ellie and Chelsy left them to it and took Rex upstairs.

They watched a Rom-Com on Netflix - one that they'd both seen before - but they didn't laugh much, even at the funny bits.

Chapter Ten:
I Don't Really Want To Swim

Thursday.

The adults were a little nervous that morning because Alina and the two graduates were due back at the lab, and Peter, Christopher and Michelle would have to spend the day quietly sabotaging everything that they were doing.

As far as Alina knew the purpose of OSS was to create a wormhole to another dimension using a government-funded particle accelerator. What she didn't know was that OSS had already done that Tuesday night (in fact, it was *two* portals) and they had the potential to destroy the world.

Ellie and Chelsy headed to school, once again looking all around for signs of wood elves or fairies, or giants or unicorns, if those things existed.

Once again the fantastical creatures were keeping out of their way.

Ellie just hoped the little apple-juggling wood elf they'd seen yesterday hadn't got into any trouble.

Finley had decided to go in too. He was probably scared he'd only have to spend his day off at the hospital again. He didn't walk to school with the two girls though, good grief. He'd always meet a couple of Year 5 boys on the village green and walk to school with them, kicking a football between them as they went.

They spent the morning rehearsing Hansel And Gretel in the school hall.

There had been a bit of rivalry between the Year 6 girls over who was going to get the part of Gretel. A couple of the girls had even fallen out over it, which Ellie thought absurd.

The part had actually gone to a quiet Ukrainian girl called Anna, who had arrived last year with almost perfect English (and a delightful accent that wasn't quite German, but definitely wasn't Somerset either) after some madman had attacked her country and her family had had to flee.

Everyone decided that was probably fair enough and were friends again.

Ellie was one of several narrators (her line was *'But! Whilst they felt incredible / they forgot - bread is edible')* and Chelsy was a werewolf and had to howl.

This, naturally, led to the question of whether werewolves were real (probably not, they thought), and also ghosts (maybe), witches (definitely) and vampires (hope not), which were also all in the show.

(If you're wondering what vampires, ghosts and werewolves are doing in Hansel and Gretel, it's a modern retelling, alright?)

In fact, they were wondering so hard that Ellie missed her cue and she got a *"The show is **next week!**"* from Mrs Adisa.

Nothing exciting happened all afternoon and the girls were thoroughly bored by the time they got let out at half three.

And that's when something very exciting happened indeed.

*

"They're not going to come to us," Chelsy said, as they were walking by the woods, staring longingly off into the trees. "That wood elf yesterday made a mistake, being so obvious."

"I thought he was an ice cream cone."

"What? Anyway, what I mean is that *we should go look for them*."

Ellie sighed. "Oh Chels, I really don't think that's a good idea."

"Why?"

"What happens if there are *actual werewolves*?"

Chelsy laughed at her. "Ellie, there aren't suddenly going to be werewolves in Peddleton Woods. Come on." And she left the pavement and strode through the long grass into the trees.

Jeepers Creepers, Ellie thought, but she followed all the same.

It was cooler between the trees, dunked in shadow, and the grass tickled her legs, and she shivered. "Chels..."

"You'll thank me if we find a unicorn. Maybe we can ride it!"

Ellie didn't think that very likely, as cool as it would be. She was just about to say they should head back to the road when they heard something.

Yelling. High-pitched yelling. Like a child.

They looked at each other and then ran towards the sound, and with a horrible jolt Ellie realised it was coming from the lake.

Peddleton Lake was large, with an island in the middle, and during the summer holidays you could rent pedalos.

People *did* swim in it, although there were signs all around saying *No Swimming*, along with life buoy rings on ropes and life jackets.

A little boy was in the lake, struggling to keep afloat. He was splashing about, spluttering and screaming, "Help me!" over and over again. His head bobbed under a couple of times.

"Oh God..." Chelsy said, and for a few awful moments they were both frozen there, staring, like they had been when the monster was crawling out of the portal.

Ellie looked around for someone - anyone - but there was no one else about. It would have to be them. "Quick," she said, finally getting her legs moving, and she ran to the life ring tied to the wall.

Chelsy joined her, flapping her hands, and then helped unwind the ring and Ellie pulled it from the wall and ran to the lake's edge.

Her heart was booming so hard it hurt, and her skin was prickling and her mouth was dry and her tongue tasted like cloth, like she had a sock in her mouth.

"Throw it!" Chelsy said, and Ellie threw the ring at the boy.

It didn't go anywhere near far enough. And what's more, the whole length of rope ended up in the water too, because Chelsy hadn't held the end of it.

"You're supposed to hold the rope!" Ellie yelled, realising with a sinking feeling that she was going to have to go in, because as much as Chelsy wanted to be a mermaid, she wasn't a very good swimmer.

Maybe if she'd spent more time actually *in* the pool rather than lying on the side sunning her plastic tail things would be different.

Ellie threw her bag down and waded into the lake up to her knees, reaching for the rope. The water was freezing and she swore. She couldn't help herself.

Chelsy grabbed her hand. To her credit she waded in too, which was very brave, because she looked like she was going to cry.

Ellie stretched forward and grabbed the end of the rope, just as Chelsy slipped in the mud and went down, pulling Ellie over too.

Chelsy's head went under briefly, and she came up spurting and coughing.

"Stay on the side, Chels," Ellie said, pulling her friend to her feet. "Hold the rope for me. Don't let go of it, okay?"

"O-okay..." Chelsy said, stumbling back onto the grass, water dripping from the pleats of her skirt, and from her jumper, and from her hair.

Ellie turned back to the boy and waded towards him, holding the life ring out in front of her. Then she started swimming.

God, the water's cold, she thought, even in July, on a hot day like this. Or does water *feel colder* if the air temperature is hotter? She couldn't remember. It didn't really matter now, did it?

"Help me! Help me!" the little boy cried.

He'd drifted around to look in the opposite direction. Ellie could only see the back of his head, sleek and dark with water, bobbing in the froth.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, she reached the drowning boy. Each breath ripped sharp pains through her chest. She grabbed for his shoulders and yanked him round.

She screamed. The little boy's face was as green as an olive.

"Oh it's you!" the thing yelled, his voice falsetto.

"Oh my God!" Ellie cried, and tried to swim away again.

But the green boy had wrapped his arms around her, his weight sagged on her shoulders and she couldn't wriggle free.

"Get off!" she yelled, thrashing about, her arms locked to her sides. Her head bobbed under the surface for a second, and she came up spluttering.

"She's drowning!" the green thing was yelling.

"That's because you're pushing me down!" Ellie spluttered. "Let go of me and hold onto the ring!" She shoved it hard into his face and hit his nose.

"Ouch!"

He grabbed the ring, and Ellie yelled, "Pull us in!" and Chelsy started dragging them closer to the shore.

The little green boy gasped, his eyes pressed shut. Then he opened them and saw something over Ellie's shoulder, back on the lakeside, and he said, "Oh shucks. They will be so cross with Bulb."

Ellie looked back at Chelsy in the shallows and drew in a sharp breath and a little lake water too.

Her friend was busy pulling in the rope, apparently oblivious to the rows of fantastical beings behind her.

There were many wood elves, with fairies bobbing up and down above their heads. And there were smaller coloured lights, yellow, red, blue, green, as if someone had strung Christmas lights across the sky. Ellie had no idea what they were.

And then at one end of the group stood two larger creatures - they were bigger than Ellie and Chelsy, anyway, probably as big as Peter Stiddin - almost three times the size of the wood elves. Their skin was a mottled blue and green like algae, and they had two thick legs and two

thick arms, and a head like a knobbled potato, with long braided hair, and their green clothes looked like moss. Maybe it grew on them.

Ellie's feet touched the muddy bottom, and she stood, breathing heavily, dragging the green boy into the shallows.

Chelsy swept her wet hair out of her face, waded forward and grabbed the ring. "Oh my God he's *green*..."

Ellie nodded over Chelsy's shoulder, and Chelsy looked round and gasped, started, and nearly fell.

"So much trouble..." the little green boy mumbled sadly.

Chapter Eleven:
The Island In The Middle Of Peddleton Lake

One of the wood elves stepped forward. He was taller than most, with a very pointy hat and a walking cane.

"Well, come out of the water," he said, tapping the ground with his cane. "Deary me."

Ellie and Chelsy exchanged glances. The little green boy trudged out onto the grass and said, "I lost my hat. I be very sorry, Sir."

The girls followed him out, not knowing what to say.

The elf with the cane pursed his lips. Then he said to the girls, "I am Councillor Tangleweed. Hello."

Ellie and Chesly looked at each other again, and then both managed a stuttered, "H-hello."

"Which one of you is the Orange girl?"

Feeling slightly self-conscious, Ellie raised her hand. "I'm, er, Eleanor Orange."

Councillor Tangleweed nodded. "Ah yes." Then he looked at Chelsy. "But it appears you have the Angel Sight too, girl?"

Chelsy's wet hair kept falling in front of her face, and she swept it aside again and mumbled, "Er... the what?"

"The Angel Sight. You have seen the Angel Fire, so now you can see us."

Chelsy mumbled a little bit of nonsense and then managed, "Well I *can* see you, yes."

"And what is your name, Child?"

"C-Chelsy. Chelsy Stiddin."

"Chelsy Stoodin?"

"*No.* Chelsy *Stidd*in."

"Oh, that *is* a strange name, isn't it."

Chelsy looked at Ellie, not offended as such, just very confused. And they both thought that *Tangleweed* was stranger, to be honest.

"W-what are you?" Ellie asked finally.

"We are creatures from the mythic dimension, Eleanor Orange. We have lived here on Earth for billions of years, on a kind of parallel, you could say, with your dimension. Usually we are invisible to you all, because of the veil. But you have seen the Angel Fire, which means you have the Angel Sight, which means you can see us."

Ellie said to Chelsy, "That bright white flash in the lab - it must have been this Angel Fire..."

Chelsy said nothing, but her hair flopped in front of her face again, like curtains, and so Ellie took the purple scrunchie off her wrist and gave it to her.

"T-thanks..." Chelsy managed, taking it with hands that had started shaking from the cold and tying her hair back into a ponytail.

Councillor Tangleweed had turned to the little green boy. "Bulb! What were you *thinking?* Don't you see what could have happened?"

"The Child of Destiny saved me!" exclaimed Bulb gleefully.

The Child of Destiny?

"Yes, she did," said Councillor Tangleweed.

"I be so grateful!"

"Okay, Bulb. Being a dampened spirit hasn't dampened your spirits, has it. Har har." Tangleweed turned stern again. "But you could have *drowned* her."

"S-sorry..." said Ellie. "The Child of Destiny?"

"Yes, keep up," said Tangleweed. "You're the Orange girl from Peddleton Village. You're the Child of Destiny."

"Child of Destiny?" Chelsy said, folding her arms. "That's original. Not."

She had a point.

Councillor Tangleweed had turned back to Bulb. "Why oh why were you *swimming* in Peddleton Lake?"

"It wasn't my fault," Bulb protested, wringing water from his sleeves. "*Scrub* pushed me in!" He pointed to one of the wood elves hanging near the back of the group.

Like a pantomime, all the fantastical creatures gasped.

Tangleweed said, "*Scrub?* Is this true? You pushed Bulb into the lake?"

Scrub shuffled uncomfortably. "I didn't *mean* to push him in, Sir... You know when you want to frighten someone, say on the edge of a cliff or…"

"Or a lake?"

"Yes - or the edge of a lake - so you go up and push them but you hold on? Well I forgot to hold on, Sir. I just went up and pushed him straight in."

"Oh! Well accidents happen, I suppose."

"Going back to this Child of Destiny thing..." Ellie said, holding up a finger, her head spinning.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it," said Tangleweed.

"*Wouldn't worry about it? Child of Destiny* sounds quite important! What does it mean?"

He thought for a moment. "Do you know, I'm not entirely sure! All I know is that it has something to do with the Angel Fire."

"But I've seen the Angel Fire too," said Chelsy. "Maybe I'm the Child of Destiny."

For some reason, Ellie felt a jolt of annoyance.

But Councillor Tangleweed was chuckling. "No, I'm afraid not. The Child of Destiny is the Orange girl from Peddleton Village." He raised his mossy eyebrows at Ellie. "Are there any other Oranges in Peddleton? I have to say, it doesn't sound like a very common name?"

"There aren't." Not as far as she knew, anyway.

"Splendid. Oh well it really is quite specific, isn't it? Now come come." He beckoned them closer with his cane. "Don't mind the trolls - they won't bite. They've eaten today. Har har."

The trolls were the two blue-green creatures at the edge of the group. One of them lumbered over and took the life ring from Ellie, then tossed it like a Frisbee to the other, who returned it to the wall.

"I don't suppose you have any towels?" said Chelsy, still shivering, her arms folded tight against her chest.

"Er, no, I'm so sorry. But the fire sprites will warm you up."

The small red lights were the fire sprites, and they flew close so that Ellie could see their tiny bodies through the red glow. They looked like worms.

The fire sprites started buzzing and dancing around the two girls, and the air grew hot and shimmered. It was like being blasted by a hair dryer.

Whilst they were being dried Tangleweed introduced the other sprites. The yellow ones were spark sprites, and zapped about like lightning. The blue ones were water sprites, and the green ones were tree sprites. Although they couldn't talk, the sprites had developed a detailed body language to communicate, involving dancing and spinning and flashing their lights.

In a few minutes the girls were dry again, and the fire sprites danced off, pleased with themselves.

"So... this *Child of Destiny* thing..." Ellie started, and Tangleweed raised a hand.

"Yes, yes. The Green Man will tell you everything."

"The Green Man? That's his name?"

"Well, it's more like what he *is*."

"But you're all green men," said Chelsy.

"Yes," said Tangleweed, "but he is *really* green. You just wait. Come with me!"

There was of course no way they were not going to follow him. They picked up their school bags, and the rest of the fantastical creatures followed behind as Tangleweed led them through the wood.

Scrub, the little wood elf who had pushed Bulb into the lake, ran up beside her and said, "Can I have your shoe?"

Ellie stared down at him. "What?"

"Your shoe. Can I have it? I only want one."

"Why do you want my shoe?"

"I collect them. Not shoes specific, Miss, that would be weird. I collect all kinds of human things."

"Oh, well, I kind of need my shoe, Scrub. Both of them. I'm sorry."

He said, "Oh, okay," and hurried away again.

They saw a dog walker, but the dog walker didn't even raise his head even though the trolls had to step around him.

"Here we are," said Tangleweed.

They had walked round the lakeside, and were standing in front of a large tree with thick gnarly roots winding out of the ground like ropes.

"That's The Green Man?" Chelsy said. "He's a tree?"

"No!" Tangleweed laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. He's a shrub. Now..." He raised his head to the fairies. "All clear?"

The fairies darted around, looking in all directions, presumably for any people.

"All clear!" they squeaked.

"Okay, follow me." And Tangleweed tapped his cane on the tree trunk.

The roots suddenly *moved*, unwinding themselves and revealing a large hole at the base of the tree.

Ellie and Chelsy both gasped.

There were steps leading down, under the tree - under the *lake*.

Councillor Tangleweed started down them, then turned. "Come on! We haven't got all day!"

*

They followed Councillor Tangleweed beneath the tree, into a dark, dank passageway. When all the other creatures were in too, the tree roots must have wrapped together again, closing the hole, because

everything went suddenly dark. The fairies and sprites flew overhead, illuminating the passage.

"Are we beneath the lake?" Chelsy whispered.

"I think so..."

They held hands, should one of them trip.

The wood elves started whistling together - all of them whistling the same tune - it must have been a wood elf song, or something, and it echoed all through the passageway.

It gave the girls a headache, but they did not have the heart to complain.

Eventually they climbed up some steps and reached the end of the passageway, and Tangleweed tapped his cane, and another set of thick roots parted like drawn curtains.

They were on the island in the middle of Peddleton Lake.

"This is the residence of the spirit council of Peddleton and the greater area of St. John's," Tangleweed said. "I am its councillor."

The island was a thick copse of trees and vegetation. There were no paths, and Ellie and Chelsy had to plough through thickets and divots and brambles.

Councillor Tangleweed came to a small clearing where a large troll was standing sentry. "It's happening, Silas!" he said, gripping the troll's arm.

The troll looked Ellie and Chelsy up and down, then grunted, "The Angel Fire?"

"Yes! I must speak to Shay. Have you seen him?"

"Many times. But not lately."

"Gruh!"

"Please let go."

Councillor Tangleweed shuffled into the middle of the clearing. Chelsy and Ellie followed, passing the troll on either side warily. The troll remained still - just followed them with its eyes.

Then Tangleweed raised his cane, bellowed, "Shay!" and smacked the ground three times.

The air warped, like a mirror that has cracked into several pieces, all showing different fragments of reality.

Then from out of the air warp came a bush.

Chapter Twelve:
I Am Not A Bush!

Yes, a bush.

It was green and leafy, and about the size of a bush - everything you'd expect, really. It had two twig legs and two twig arms, and it turned back to the air warp and held up three twiggy fingers like a litter-picker, and it pincered them together and the air warp closed.

Then it turned back to face them.

It *did* have a face, actually. It had a moustache made out of two large leaves, and a large hole for a mouth and two smaller holes for eyes.

The Green Man stared at the two children.

"Which one of you is the Orange girl?"

Ellie held up her hand like she was at school.

"I'm Eleanor Orange," said Eleanor Orange.

The Green Man turned to Chelsy. "And you are?"

"Chelsy Stiddin."

"Chelsy Stoodin?"

Chelsy rolled her eyes. "*Stiddin*. What's your name."

"I am The Green Man," said the bush, "but you may call me Shay."

"And... you're a bush," Chelsy said.

Shay frowned very deeply. "I am *not* a bush. I am a *shrub*."

Councillor Tangleweed tapped his cane on the ground nervously.

The troll gave a brief look over his shoulder at them.

For God's sake, Chels, don't annoy the bush, Ellie thought. "Er... Councillor T-Tangleweed said you'd be able to explain what's going on?"

"Well, I can certainly tell you some of it. I only know what the guardians tell me, which isn't much, given that it's happening on *my* Earth."

"The guardians?"

"Guardian angels, of course. From the angel dimension."

"Oh."

Of course.

"Who else has seen the Angel Fire?" Shay asked. "I need to speak to them also. You are all about to see some seriously weird stuff over the next few days."

Ellie and Chelsy looked at each other, both thinking exactly the same thing:

Even weirder than a talking bush?

"My mum and dad and brother," said Ellie, answering Shay's question.

"And my dad," added Chelsy.

"And..." Ellie stopped. How was she going to explain about the fake Aunt Cathy?

"Where are these family members?"

"At my house," said Ellie. "Or working in the lab."

"Which is also at her house."

The Green Man gave a very long sigh. "Oh yes. The *lab*."

So the little fantastical creatures knew about the experiment.

"Well come on then." Shay reached out the same three-twigged branch, and this time opened the pincer. The air warped and swirled.

"What *is* that?" Chelsy gasped.

"That is a portal. A portal that was *meant* to be opened," he added pointedly. "I've only stretched spacetime, no need to get your knickers in a twist. It's your front garden. Look."

Ellie looked through the portal and saw it was true. "That's my house!"

The Green Man said nothing. He was already stepping through the portal onto the Oranges' lawn.

Chelsy looked at Ellie and shrugged. May as well.

They followed the talking bush through the portal.

*

Christopher and Michelle were in the kitchen drinking coffee when Ellie, Chelsy and the bush walked in.

"Hello," said Shay.

Michelle screamed and dropped her coffee mug (she wouldn't be happy, Ellie thought as it smashed, it was a *Le Creuset*). Christopher's eyes widened so much there was a moment when they may have popped right out of his head.

"Girls!" he cried, yanking them behind him. Then he grabbed the mop from behind the fridge and started brandishing it at Shay. "Hey! Hey!"

"That's very rude," said Shay. "I only said hello."

"Off with you! Away!" Christopher was yelling, like you would to a stray dog.

And then Michelle cried, "Christopher, it's a talking bush!"

And Shay gasped very loudly, said, "I am a *shrub!"* And he twitched one twig, and the wooden mop handle started wriggling in Christopher's hands, sprouting thorns so he had to drop it.

"Mum, Dad, it's okay!" Ellie said. "He's a... he's a *friend*..."

The parents stopped their wildness. "This bush is your friend?"

"*I am a shrub, you stupid woman!*" And Shay waved his branches around like he was celebrating a goal, and leaves wafted down all over the kitchen floor.

They all stared at him, dumbstruck and scared.

Then Rex plodded in, took no notice of Shay because he couldn't see him, had a long drink of water, and then plodded out again.

Ellie said, "Shall we go in the lounge? It might be better if we sat down."

No one said anything.

Then Finley appeared in the kitchen doorway. He was eating a granola bar, looking from the humans in the room to the living foliage. "Huh," he said. "So you're alive."

"Yes," said Shay. "And I am a *shrub*, before you say anything else." He looked at Ellie. "This must be your brother."

"Yep. That's Finley."

"He's not screaming at me like your mum and dad did."

"I could hear you talking from up in my room," said Finley. "You were shouting about not being a bush, and Ellie said you were her best friend..."

"I never said *best* friend..."

"And so I come downstairs, wondering what's going on, and it's pretty much what I expected."

"He is called Shay," Ellie said quickly. "And he's a *shrub*. And he's from a... parallel dimension?"

Shay ruffled his leaves. "Yes, I guess you could say that. I am from the mythic dimension, which exists on parallel with your universe. You can't see us, because of the veil, but we can see you. Except since your experiment you lot *can* see us. It's as if the veil doesn't exist for you now, and that's a problem."

"My dad isn't here," said Chelsy. "He needs to hear this too."

"H-he's in the lab," managed Christopher. "Keeping an eye on Alina."

"Go and get him," said Shay. "*Just* him. If this *Alina* doesn't have the Angel Sight then she won't see me and you'll all look like you're talking to the air."

Christopher swallowed, then nodded. He looked at Michelle. "I'll go. You're going to be okay?"

Michelle looked like she didn't think anything was ever going to be okay again, but she gave a small smile and said, "Yes. Of course."

Then she cleaned away the broken coffee mug and they all went into the lounge, except Christopher, who went to get Peter.

The girls and Finley and Michelle sat on one sofa, Ellie hugging her knees.

The Green Man stood still in the centre of the room. He said to Michelle, "So... are those ginger streaks in your hair natural, or..."

"No," said Michelle. "They are not."

They waited in complete silence after that, for what must have been five or six long minutes.

Finally, Christopher returned with Peter, who saw Shay in the middle of lounge carpet and said, "Why have you brought that bush in?"

And Shay wheeled on him and bellowed, "*I. AM. A. SHRUUUUUBBB!"* and Peter literally started screaming.

They all chimed up with, "It's okay, Dad," and "Don't panic," and "Calm down," but Peter heard none of it. Instead he ran forward and tried to boot Shay through the window. But Shay simply sidestepped his wild kick and Peter went down on his bum and started screaming again.

Christopher dragged him to his feet and pushed him down onto the sofa. "It's okay!" he yelled, shaking him.

"Shall I slap him?" asked Chelsy, trying not to laugh.

"It's not funny! What the hell is that thing?"

"I am The Green Man," said Shay, looking very unimpressed. "And I am the King of Earth."

*

Quite a bold title, that.

Shay explained once again how he was from the mythic dimension, a parallel dimension usually invisible to all those on Earth.

"And there are countless other dimensions. You opened a portal to the angel dimension with your particle accelerator, and you saw the Angel Fire. Now you all have the Angel Sight, which means you can see all other dimensions."

"Have you not seen any weird little creatures the last two days?" Chelsy said.

"What, apart from *him*, you mean?" Christopher nodded at Shay.

"We've seen fairies and trolls and sprites and wood elves." Chelsy counted them off on her fingers.

"We saved a wood elf from drowning," Ellie added.

Christopher said, "No!" exasperated, and looked at Michelle and Peter for support. They just stared back at him. "Guys?"

"Well," said Michelle, taking a breath. "I did see something weird in the bushes around the house yesterday. Looked like a little green man."

"I think I saw one too," Peter admitted. "Outside the lab."

Shay tutted theatrically. "Those wood elves... they are *not* taking this seriously enough."

Christopher laughed in disbelief. "A little green man? And you didn't say anything?"

"Just assumed my eyes were playing tricks on me," Michelle said. "Thought it must have been a squirrel, or something."

"A *squirrel?*"

"I haven't seen anything." Finley shrugged.

"That's because you're always on your Nintendo," said Ellie.

"What you are seeing," Shay said, putting his twigs to his hips, "are the creatures of the mythic dimension. It's going to happen from now on."

Christopher shook his head. "And you... you just expect us to accept all this?"

Shay shrugged. A shrub shrug. "What else are you going to do? It's your own fault. You opened the portal."

The adults said nothing to that.

Ellie cleared her throat. "Er... Shay? Councillor Tangleweed said something I wanted to ask you about. He said I am the *Child of Destiny?"*

Chesly rolled her eyes. "Oh, here we go."

Ellie ignored her. She looked at The Green Man hopefully. Well, being the Child of Destiny sounds exciting, doesn't it?

After a moment Shay nodded. "Yes. You are Destiny's Child."

No one said anything for a moment, except Peter, who said quietly, "Aren't they a band?"

"You have the mark." And Shay reached out and pincered her left wrist and turned it over, revealing the seven-pointed star burnt into her skin. "That is the mark of the Angel Fire."

Chelsy said, "If it's Angel **Fire** then why is it a star?"

"Shut *up*, Chelsy!" Ellie said.

Michelle hurried over and grabbed her daughter's wrist. She gasped. "How did you get this, El?"

"The bright light from the portal burnt me."

Michelle looked wide-eyed at Shay. "What does this mean?"

"Let me guess," Chelsy said. "You're a wizard."

"I am *not!"* snapped Ellie, adding, "Am I?" hopefully.

But Shay shook his head. "I, er... I'm afraid it's not a *good* thing, Child. You see, there's a *prophecy*."

Silence for a moment, and then Chelsy said, "Of course there is."

"W-What does this prophecy say?" asked Ellie, not liking the sound of this one bit.

"I don't know the details. Only the guardians hold the prophecies, and they don't usually go around telling everyone. But it's about you, Eleanor Orange, and the Angel Fire, and... the future of the mythic dimension, and the angel dimension, and this dimension too. It's the future of your world."

"Oh, right," said Ellie.

Chapter Thirteen:
What The Gloom Lord Wants Most Of All

"There is another realm," Shay continued, "attached to the angel dimension, but the very *opposite* of it. It is known as *Gloom*."

"Gloom?"

"Yes. It's a realm of darkness, ruled over by the demon king Dyger."

"Dyger?"

"Yes."

Chelsy said with a sigh, "Please don't call him the dark lord..."

"He is known as the Gloom Lord!" Shay said irritably. "Or the Lord of Gloom! And you should be scared of him! We all are! Even the guardians are scared of him!"

Finley said, "Do you need to be watered?"

"Well, what's he doing?" Michelle asked, sinking back down onto the sofa. "This Dyger? This Lord of Gloom?"

"He's been getting stronger and stronger for eons. He has sent his forces to attack the Angel Kingdom..."

"The Angel Kingdom?"

"Yes - where the guardians live, of course."

Of course.

Shay continued, "Gloom has taken over vast regions of the Angel Kingdom. He is *that* powerful."

"On his own?" asked Christopher. He was sitting on the sofa next to Peter.

"No. He has armies of demons and monsters to help him." Shay let his words hang in the air for a few moments, waiting for them to make the connection.

"Oh crap," said Michelle (because she wouldn't swear in front of Ellie). "We opened *two* portals. One to the... the Angel Kingdom..."

"And the other to Gloom," Shay nodded.

"That thing..." Chelsy said, "...with all the teeth on its head..."

Ellie swallowed. Amazingly, she'd been able to put the monster that they'd cleaved in half to the back of her mind, what with all the cute little elves and fairies she could now see running about. "That was from Gloom..."

"It was one of Dyger's monsters, yes," said Shay. "They're called reapers. They're powerful, horrifying monsters. Completely stupid, of course. But the demons can control them."

"We killed it, though..." Peter said, looking a little ill. "They *can* be killed."

"Everything that lives can die."

At least that was something.

"It decomposed very quickly," Michelle said. "That reaper thing." She looked at Peter. "Didn't you say it was gone by the next morning, Pete?"

Shay shrugged. "They do. And demons disappear like fog when they are killed."

"*Demons*..." Michelle gripped her hands tight together. "Demons, like, from folklore?"

"You are not the only ones with the Angel Sight," said Shay. "There have been others, throughout the millennia. Where do you think tales of demons, and of elves, and fairies came from? People who could see through the veil, of course. People who could see us."

"But..." Christopher frowned. "We got the Angel Sight from opening a portal. There weren't particle accelerators in Ancient times..."

"Yours is not the only way to get the Sight," said Shay, ruffling his leaf moustache. "And you may have killed the reaper, but you also let out some *actual demons* when you opened that Gloom portal. Actual demons that are out there, flying around on Earth. And we've got to clean up your mess."

This time, Michelle did swear.

"I knew they weren't just shadows!" Ellie said.

Then the adults each said, "Sorry," and looked at the floor, like naughty children told off by their mom, except in this instance their mom was a bush.

"Obviously, we cannot allow your experiment to be repeated," said Shay, "so I have sent some spark sprites to destroy your particle accelerator."

Well that was something, at least.

The adults didn't have a clue what spark sprites were, of course, but they trusted this talking shrub who called himself the King of Earth.

"Alina's down there with it," Michelle said, and then explained: "Alina Sharma - she's our partner..."

"I don't care who she is. She won't see the spark sprites, and she won't get hurt. The accelerator will simply overload and then its circuits will fry and it'll stop working."

That sounded fair.

After a moment Ellie said, "So, this demon king. Dyger. You said he's invading the Angel Kingdom? Is that what he wants? To take over?"

Shay grunted and shuffled about and shed a couple more leaves. "Well, the Angel Kingdom is too strong for him. At the moment, anyway. What Dyger wants most of all is the Angel Fire. That's when he'll be unstoppable."

"And... and where is the Angel Fire now?"

"Why, isn't it obvious?" Shay asked. "*You're* the Child of Destiny, Eleanor Orange. The Angel Fire is in *you*."

*

Nope. Nuh-uh.

Not possible, not happening, no thank you.

After a humungous pause, Michelle cried, "*WHAT?"*

Ellie gobbled air like a fish.

Chelsy just stared at her.

Christopher and Peter had stood up from the sofa, with "What do you mean?" and "Now see here..."

The Green Man lifted one of his pincered little twig arms, made a couple of snapping motions, as if he was picking flies from the air. "Well, I've said all I have to say," and he pulled at the air, and it... it *ripped*, like before, a gaping hole in their living room, and in the fabric of spacetime itself.

"You can't just leave us with that!" Christopher said sternly. "Where do you think you're going? Actually... where *is* that?"

There was a wide brown river through the portal, and thick dense jungle.

"It's the Amazon," said Shay. "Beautiful place." And with that he jumped through the portal onto the riverbank, waved, and added, "Don't worry about a thing, Eleanor Orange! The guardians will look after you!" And then he zipped the portal closed, and it disappeared.

The sound of the rushing river was replaced by silence, and there was no sign of the portal, and no sign of Shay except for a few fallen leaves, which were already curling and turning yellow and brown.

The six of them looked at each other, one-by-one, and finally all eyes settled on Ellie. She felt her face flush.

Then her mother said, "Ellie, what did that bush mean when he said the Angel Fire was *in you?"*

"How am I supposed to know, Mum? There was that flash when you opened the portal, and it knocked me over and gave me this scar." She showed them her wrist. "I don't know what else to tell you."

"It means she's the *Child of Destiny*..." Chelsy said, and Ellie was sure there was a bit of scorn there.

Ellie frowned at her. "Oh my God... you're jealous!"

"I am not!" said Chelsy, horrified.

"Girls, this is serious..."

"Yeah, and she is *seriously jealous."* Ellie crossed her arms, and Chelsy pouted and shot back, "*Am not!"*

"Girls!" This was Peter. "This is not a joke."

No one was joking.

"I want to be the Child of Destiny," said Finley.

"Do we need to take her to the hospital?" said Michelle, ignoring her son.

"And say *what?"* hissed Christopher, totally exasperated.

"I don't know!"

"What even *is* the... the Angel Fire? Did we even think to ask?"

"I don't know!"

Shay's explanation hadn't explained much. It had just left them even more confused.

But if Ellie knew just one thing, it was this: If Dyger wanted the Angel Fire, he must not be allowed to get it.

She didn't know how she could stop him, of course. She was just an eleven-year-old kid.

"Do... do you think I'll develop special powers?" she asked.

Chelsy gave her a real dirty look and snorted.

But before anyone could reply, Peter winced.

Then he flumped down onto the sofa and gripped his chest.

Chapter Fourteen:
A Guardian Visits The Toilets

"ECG's fine," said Christopher, as he came back into the waiting room. "It wasn't a heart attack, Chelsy."

Chelsy had been sat bolt upright the entire time, and she didn't relax. "What's the matter with him then?"

"Well it's hard to know. His pulse is really quick, but his blood pressure is okay. It's basically the same thing that I experienced yesterday."

"So he's going to be alright?"

"Yes. They just need his pulse to come down before they let him home. He's going into a cubicle, and you can go and sit with him. Come with me, I'll take you."

Ellie squeezed her hand as she got up, and Chelsy gave her a small smile. Then she left, following Christopher through the double doors.

Ellie sat back next to her mother and brother and sighed.

Christopher had driven them all to the hospital in the Land Rover. Michelle had suggested that she stay home with the kids, but Chelsy had wanted to go with her dad, understandably, and Christopher had said he didn't want to let Ellie out of his sight 'if there's some kind of demon after her', and they weren't going to leave Finley at home alone.

It was already past eight o'clock, and all they'd eaten was some takeaway food from the hospital canteen, and they were all tired, and Peter was worried about Rex, who was at the Oranges' house alone.

Christopher and Michelle were a little worried too, but at least he was too small to, say, open the fridge.

And when it was clear Peter would be staying the night at the hospital (the atenolol, which was a beta blocker, was taking a while to work and they would probably have to increase the dose), they couldn't do anything but head home.

Chelsy seemed to be doing okay. She'd accepted her dad was in no mortal danger (again, the doctor had put it down to stress and anxiety) and that he would be out the next day.

Christopher packed him an overnight bag and went back to the hospital whilst the girls got ready for bed.

They hadn't eaten much, but their tummies were full anyway.

As Chelsy lay out on the chaise longue at the bottom of Ellie's bed, Rex curled up on her feet, she held up the purple scrunchie Ellie had given her and said, "Can I keep this until I've moved back home?"

"Sure," said Ellie. "It's just a scrunchie."

"Thanks. Does your scar hurt?"

"No," Ellie said, truthfully. "It itches a bit, I guess. But it doesn't hurt."

"Do you feel any different?"

"What? Now I'm the *Child of Destiny*, you mean?" and Ellie raised her hands in a grand gesture, totally not taking the title seriously. "Chels, it doesn't mean anything, you know. It's just words."

"Words are powerful," Chelsy said in a small voice.

"Yes, but sometimes words are only powerful because other people believe they're powerful. Sometimes words are just words."

It was a big thought for a little girl to have. Maybe she really *was* the Child of Destiny! Ha ha!

Chelsy said nothing for a moment, and then said, "But sometimes it doesn't matter if words are true or not if enough people believe them."

Ellie sighed. "Don't start on Brexit, Chels. It's nearly ten o'clock."

Ooooh.

Anyway, Ellie and Chesly went to sleep under the soft watchful glow of a couple of fairies (Feather and Waggletoes, who we came across earlier), and a handful of sprites, who don't have names because they're basically worms.

Tomorrow was Friday, and it would be the very last day Eleanor Orange spent at school as a normal girl.

*

Peter phoned from the hospital early Friday morning. He was doing okay, and was expecting to be let home soon, but the doctors were very busy at the moment because it had been a very hot week, and that meant lots of people needed emergency care.

Then at half past eight, just as Ellie and Chelsy were ready to leave for school, Alina knocked on the door and told them the accelerator was broken.

The two girls exchanged a glance, and so did Chris and Michelle.

The spark sprites had done their job, then.

"What do you mean, broken?" Michelle said, trying to keep her voice neutral.

"It doesn't turn on. Simple as that."

"It was working yesterday."

"Well today it's not."

"Wow, I can't believe it," said Christopher, and Ellie was sure the Academy Awards would give him the Oscar there and then.

"Are the grad students in yet?" asked Michelle, walking Alina to the door, saying, "Bye girls," to Ellie and Chelsy as she passed.

"Have a good day at school," Chris said. "Have you got your key?"

"Yes, Dad."

The three adults left the house and headed across the back lawn.

"Well at least that's something," said Chelsy.

In school, they had the last awards assembly of the year, with people getting their house point certificates, and swimming badges, and karate belts, and about twenty kids had happy birthday sung to them (the July and August babies), including Finley, who's birthday was July 30th.

It was a great source of amusement to Finley that his birthday was always during the summer holidays, whilst Ellie's was usually on a school day.

Then Year 5 and 6 spent the rest of the morning rehearsing *Hansel & Gretel*, which ran on Monday and Tuesday next week, once for the rest of the school and once for the parents.

And then they had music after lunch, and Mrs Adisa had them all in a circle singing *London's Burning* as a round (I'm sure you've done it; everyone's done it).

And then when Ellie's part was singing about fetching the engine, a *ghost* walked through the wall.

It looked human - well, human*ish*. It had no features on its face, and looked like it was made out of white-grey fog. As it moved wisps of clouds danced around it like steam over a hot pan.

He had the most magnificent pair of wings - they were almost as big as he was (Ellie only thought of it as a 'he' because it didn't have boobs, but then why would it).

And then she realised with a jolt that this was not a ghost.

This must be a guardian.

There were scarlet patterns all over his wings and smoky body, and his head, and where his face should have been, like tattoos.

Chelsy was looking wide-eyed from Ellie back to the winged figure, still dutifully singing, *"Pour on water, pour on water."*

Finley hadn't noticed, because he had his back to it.

Of course, the rest of the class didn't realise they had a guardian in their midst because they couldn't see him. Although when one of his wings brushed Mrs Adisa she gave a shiver and looked over her shoulder.

"Which one of you is Eleanor Orange?" asked the guardian, looking round. His voice was old, and neither definitively male nor female. He didn't have a mouth. The voice just came out of his head.

Finley gave a little gasp and snapped his head round.

Please don't scream, Ellie thought, because her little brother looked like he was going to do just that.

The guardian looked down at Finley and said, "Well it can't be you."

"*Finley*," snapped Mrs Adisa, "*pay attention!*"

Finley turned back round, looking first at Ellie and then at Chelsy, who gave a subtle shrug.

Ellie raised her hand at the guardian.

He bowed his head. "I need to talk to you."

Mrs Adisa sighed upon seeing Ellie's raised hand. "Eleanor, what is it?" she asked over the singing.

"Can I go to the toilet, please?"

"Yes, but be quick!"

Ellie nodded gratefully and got up off the floor.

Chelsy immediately put up her hand and said, "Can I go too, Mrs Adisa?"

But their teacher shook her head. "You can go when Ellie gets back. Dear me, what is it with you Year 6 girls wanting to go to the toilet in pairs?" She had to restart the round because the singing had fallen apart.

Ellie gave Chelsy an apologetic look (although she wasn't particularly sorry - she was the Child of Destiny, after all) and left the room.

The guardian followed her into the girls' toilets, which Ellie was relieved to find empty. She said absolutely nothing as they walked, but her heart started to beat faster and faster like a runaway railway.

"Okay," she said, after checking the stalls were all empty, "we can talk."

"I am At'lon," said the guardian, "and I am one of the guardians from the Angel Kingdom."

Note that in a fantasy story, there must be at least one race of fantastical creatures with apostrophes in their names.

Eleanor didn't know his name had an apostrophe in it, of course, because she hadn't seen it written down.

"Oh, hey, At'lon..." she said, clutching her hands together and leaning on a nearby sink.

"Well, I do myself a disservice," he continued. "I am actually the current guardian president, and I was voted into the role."

Was he being *smug?* "Oh, er... congratulations?"

"I understand The Green Man has already talked to you," said At'lon, "and those others who have the Angel Sight."

The fact that he had no face apart from the moving scarlet lines was so unnerving. Ellie didn't know where to look.

She noticed he didn't show up in the mirrors over the sinks, either. He didn't have a reflection.

"Shay told us some things... About Dyger, and Gloom, and how... how I'm the Child of Destiny... And, er, how the Angel Fire is in me, and Dyger wants to get it. So, yeah."

"When your parents opened their portal into Angel Kingdom, they opened it right into the *Angel Fire Temple*. And the Angel Fire shot out of the portal and into *you*."

Ellie remembered the bright flash of light - the Angel Fire - shooting out and knocking her over. She looked down at the star scar on her wrist.

"Well, why can't I just give it back?" she asked. "You can have it, I don't want it. Take me to this... this Angel Fire Temple and take it out of me."

"Well, we could do that," At'lon admitted. "But we can't."

Ellie frowned. "Er... is English your first language, or..."

"Did The Green Man tell you about the prophecy?"

"He said there *was* a prophecy, but he didn't know what it said."

The guardian nodded. "We are very secretive about our prophecies."

"Seems... fair enough, I guess."

"The prophecy told us that the Angle Fire would be lost, and fall into the possession of the Orange girl from Peddleton Village, Somerset."

"That is very specific," Ellie said.

"She - *you* - is the Child of Destiny."

"But if you knew this was going to happen, why didn't you stop it? You could have easily sent some spark sprites to destroy the particle accelerator, or whatever..."

At'lon nodded. "We could have done that. But we couldn't."

Ellie winced. "I'm... not sure you understand what you're saying..."

"We have stopped the portals opening many times before."

That surprised her. Ellie's mouth fell open. "What? You have?"

"Ellie, there are thousands upon thousands of particle accelerators in the world. They're used in hospitals, and industry, and research. There have been hundreds of occasions where *What Was Written* has told us about a portal opening."

"What Was What?"

"What Was Written. It's the book of prophecy. And on each occasion we've had to go and stop that portal opening, for the good of our world and yours. What, you just thought your parents were geniuses?"

Ellie pursed her lips. "I'm not sure."

She probably *did* think her parents were geniuses. A lot of kids do, until they grow up.

"But this time is different." At'lon held onto a sink and looked at his non-existent reflection in the mirror. Then he looked back to Ellie with his non-existent eyes. "This time the prophecy said we had to let it happen. We had to let your parents open the portal. We had to let you take the Angel Fire..."

"Er..." Ellie held up a finger, ready to point out that she didn't *take* it at all, thanks, but At'lon was on a roll.

"And we can't take it back. Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because of Dyger. The demon king." The guardian sighed and rubbed his head with one hand. "Eleanor Orange, this weekend the demons of Gloom will invade the Earth."

Chapter Fifteen:
Ellie Visits The Angel Kingdom. Sorta

Well that didn't sound good, did it?

Ellie had to steady herself on the sink again. "W-what?"

"Don't worry. We're going to stop it."

Oh that's alright then. "Oh, you *are* going to stop this then, are you?"

"No. *We*. *We* are going to stop it. When I say *we* I mean you as well."

Ellie's head was tossing and turning like a ship in a storm. "You could have just stopped my parents from opening the portal! You could have stopped all this!"

"Yes, but if we had then Dyger would have continued his assault on Angel Kingdom and eventually it *would have fallen*. It's all in What Was Written, I told you. And he would have got the Angel Fire from the Temple and then Earth would have been lost as well. That's why we let your parents open the portal. That's why we let the Angel Fire shoot into you. It was the only way to stop Dyger from getting it."

"But won't he still take over Angel Kingdom? He won't be able to get the Angel Fire, because it's not there, but he doesn't know that."

President At'lon said nothing.

Ellie swallowed. "At'lon - Dyger doesn't know that *I* have the Angel Fire, does he?"

"He does know, actually, yes."

Ellie started screaming. It was good timing, actually, because at that moment a little Year 3 girl walked into the toilet, came across Ellie screaming to herself and turned around and walked out again.

"But that means he'll be coming for me!"

"Yes. Stop shrieking."

"How does he know?"

"Because one of our guardians told him. Their name is O'nair," (another apostrophe) "and O'nair left us and joined Gloom, telling Dyger about the prophecy." At'lon added, almost to himself, "Well, not *all* of the prophecy."

"So this... this O'nair betrayed you? Told Dyger about me having the Angel Fire?"

"Yes, well - they betrayed you too. O'nair was supposed to be your guardian."

Ellie's mouth unhinged. "My *guardian?"*

"Yes. Quite funny really."

"*Funny?"*

"Oh, do not worry, Eleanor Orange. You have been assigned another guardian to protect you."

Ellie shook her head, trying to clear it. "I have? A guardian angel?"

"Yes. But they're not very good." At'lon chuckled. "Completely useless, actually. The other guardians weren't happy with me. But..." He gave a shrug.

Ellie rubbed her eyes, trying to take everything in.

President At'lon had told her about the prophecy - they had *let* OSS open the portals. They had *let* the Angel Fire shoot into her, because it was the only way to keep it out of Dyger's reach.

And then there was O'nair - the betrayer. O'nair had joined Gloom and told Dyger about the prophecy, so now Dyger would be looking for her.

Don't forget about your guardian angel, though, Ellie! And don't worry about the fact that they're useless, apparently!

"Does that all make sense?" At'lon asked.

Ellie yelled, "*Are you joking?"*

"No. I very rarely joke, Eleanor Orange. If I do joke, you will know about it, because you will laugh. Extremely. Hard."

Grrrr!

"Now it is time to go," said President At'lon.

Ellie sighed deeply. "I can't believe you're leaving me with this."

"Oh no, you're coming too. Well, your mind is."

Ellie held up her hands. "Wait, what?"

"I am going to show you Angel Kingdom. I can't take you there physically, of course. Guardians can dimension hop, but that's only because we have no material body. You would need a portal. However, I can take your *mind* with me."

Ellie put her hands to her temples. "My mind? Wait... no..."

"I assure you I can. You see these bands?" At'lon pointed to the scarlet patterns, as if they should mean something to her. "It's completely safe and painless."

"I can't go to Angel Kingdom," she said, "I've already been in the toilet too long. People will think I'm... Oh, wait..." She'd had a thought. "Or even worse, they'll think that it's... you know... Or do you know? T-The thing that happens to girls? They'll think... Oh this is so embarrassing..."

"Why is it embarrassing?" asked At'lon.

"*It just **is**, okay?* These things *are* embarrassing!"

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't - you're made of fog! I don't even know if you're a girl or boy!"

"Guardians are neither," he said.

It said. *They* said?

"If it puts your mind at rest," At'lon continued, "no time will pass here, in this dimension."

Ellie stopped flapping. "What?"

"I am going to take your mind to the angel dimension - to Angel Kingdom, right? I'll simply return it to this *very point* in spacetime in your dimension. Do you get it?"

"Er..."

"No time will pass here."

She thought about it, and then said, "Do you promise?"

At'lon must have been wondering why it was such a big deal. "Yes."

Ellie nodded. "Okay. Take me."

*

President At'lon reached out a hand and touched her forehead.

It was just like the time Finley had put a worm on her forehead once when she'd been asleep. So cold it felt almost wet.

She saw At'lon's scarlet bands glow, and then her eyes rolled up and everything went white. She had the sensation of floating, and then flying through the air at tremendous speed.

The whiteness all around then coalesced into streaky clouds, and after a moment blue sky became visible in patches.

She was *flying*.

Suddenly she broke through the bottom of the clouds and could see the Angel Kingdom far below.

It was nothing like she'd ever seen.

There were mountains - *floating* mountains - some covered in jungles, or forests, or snow, others bare lifeless rock. There were floating islands, moving this way and that like slow ponderous airships.

And there were multi-coloured buildings on every floating landmass. Gold and silver and reds and blues and greens and every shade in between.

In fact, some of the buildings themselves were floating.

They were grand, and curved, and domed and sinuous, as though shaped by water, as if following the shape of a river or a raindrop.

Ellie tried to look around, but found she couldn't move. She was a passenger. And then she heard the flap of wings from above her, and as she dove down through the air she saw her foggy white, scarlet-banded arms stretched out in front of her.

They weren't *her* arms, of course.

They were At'lon's.

She was piggybacking on his mind, seeing things through his eyes (which was weird, because it didn't look like he had any).

They had any, she corrected. At'lon was neither male nor female.

This place is amazing, she thought.

And At'lon said, "Yes, it is, isn't it."

What, wait... you can hear my thoughts?

"You're in my head, Eleanor Orange. Of course I can."

They were flying past some of the floating landmasses now. She could see other guardians in the buildings, which didn't seem to have many outer walls, just wraparound balconies.

They passed a large red-and-tan building with a colossal dome, and At'lon said, "That's Sir'Keshens Academy, our military training facility."

Sir'Keshens?

"Yes. Every guardian has basic training at Sir'Keshens. But now, because of the threat from Gloom, I have decreed that every guardian has advanced military training, regardless of their age or current role."

Guardians get old then? Get old and... die?

"Of course. Everything that lives must die. Although our lifetimes are much longer than yours. Look there..." At'lon pointed to a floating gothic castle in the distance, which was made entirely out of white stone and seemed to bob up and down as if floating on the ocean. "That's Whitecastle, the school for newborn guardians."

Guardian angels have to go to school?

"Yes, Eleanor Orange. There is such a lot we must learn in order to live amongst you. Not to mention the other worlds we must protect. It's not just yours, you know."

Other worlds, Ellie thought, feeling suddenly very small and insignificant, even if she *was* the Child of Destiny.

Then they were approaching a desert landmass - Ellie could see no green at all. Just baked, bleached rocky mountains and craggy cliffs, and a large silver lake and winding river.

As they got closer she could see what looked like an arrangement of villas near the lake, each with a golden roof.

There were guardian sentries everywhere. She counted ten flying in a holding pattern, back and forth between floating platforms above the villas.

And there were many guardians around the buildings too, like little specs of dust at this distance.

This place is obviously really important. She said it to herself, but At'lon agreed.

"It is. Bit pointless to have all the guards, though, given that the Angel Fire isn't even there anymore."

Ellie thought, *Ah. So this is...*

"Yes. It's the Angel Fire Temple." President At'lon landed on hard baked terracotta rock in the middle of the Temple grounds. The guardian sentries bowed their heads as they walked past.

Then Ellie saw another guardian walking towards them from the villas, and she felt At'lon *tense.*

Who is that.

At'lon didn't reply.

This new guardian was covered in gold bands, arcs and circles and swooshes as opposed to the angular patterns on At'lon's own body.

"President At'lon," said this new guardian, giving a stiff bow.

"Senator Pa'na." At'lon returned the nod. "What are you doing here?"

"Paying my respects to the Tree. I guess that's still allowed?"

Tense as a taut violin string.

Cor blimey, Ellie thought.

"You are free to go as you please, Senator. As long as you don't... interfere."

Senator Pa'na said nothing as the president walked past. But then they shouted, "She's just a child!"

What did *that* mean?

At'lon stopped. Turned. "Not now."

"But this is madness!"

"The senate have voted. You lost." The president began walking again. "Get over it."

Pa'na was silent for a few moments, and then called, "*I have heard stories from other senators.* I know what you did, and I won't drop this!"

Ellie could feel the tension in President At'lon with each step.

What was that all about?

At'lon turned to see Senator Pa'na flying away. "Oh, nothing. They're just upset they lost the senate vote. That's all."

What vote?

"It doesn't matter. Look, in politics, not everyone is your friend, okay? I'll have no more about it."

And that was final.

The Temple grounds were enclosed within a tall wall. Water fell down in a gentle curtain from the top, covering the wall entirely, every inch of it, all around the complex. And there were canals everywhere, shallow channels crisscrossing the courtyard.

And at regular places were mounted cannons, all pointing into the air.

Ellie frowned mentally, because the cannons were all attached to hoses which fed into the canals.

*Those aren't... **water** cannons, are they?*

"They are, yes," said At'lon as they walked.

What, in case there's a fire?

The guardian president chuckled. "No. You see, Eleanor Orange, water *kills* demons."

Ellie was sure she must have misheard. That didn't sound right. *What?*

"Hard to believe I know. Unfortunately, it kills guardians too. We are made of the same stuff as demons, you see. We're non-material entities. Made from ether. And water dissolves ether."

Nooo...

"Oh, you need enough water. We can't be killed just by the water in Earth's atmosphere, for instance. Although whenever a guardian has a mission on Earth they will take protective steps."

*But... what if it **rains?***

"It doesn't rain here."

It definitely rains in England! All the time!

"As I said, protective steps. And if a guardian *must* take on its natural form, it can usually escape the rain by diving underground. We can sense water, so can avoid sewers, and things like that. And we can tell if rain is imminent."

So all this water around here is, what? Protection from the demons?

"Yes. But demons have their own ways of protecting themselves. Demons can possess people. It's what they do. They take over a human host and control them from the inside. Obviously when they're inside a person they are protected from water."

But, aren't humans like, ninety percent water?

"Don't try and be clever. Here the demons have no one to possess, so water is effective against them."

But, I thought you said back in the loo that Dyger is winning?

"He is. But Dyger doesn't just send his demons, or else we could fight them better. He has other monsters, too."

Ellie remembered the clawed, fang-faced monster that Shay had called a reaper.

They had now reached the largest villa. Its walls too were curtained with waterfalls. And it had a moat, which had fountains in it, although the fountains weren't on.

President At'lon nodded to the two sentries. They bowed, and then flew up to the roof of the villa, where they both gripped the end of a long wooden beam. They pulled, and the beam swung, and a section of the water wall opened inward.

At'lon walked into the villa.

It was long, with an open courtyard in the middle, and water cannons mounted to the roof. In the middle of the courtyard was a huge tree covered in thin multicoloured fruit. The floor was white marble, crisscrossed with softly glowing veins.

It's beautiful, Ellie thought. And it was.

"Come closer." At'lon took her a bit nearer the tree and pointed to the multicoloured fruit. "See these?"

Ellie did see them, and realised they were not fruit at all.

They were little creatures, in every colour of the rainbow, growing on the tree like buds. They were about the size of a date, and just as shrivelled, with tiny wings.

"These are angelings," President At'lon said. "They grow on this tree, and when they're big enough they fall to the ground and die."

O-oh... thought Ellie. That didn't sound like a happy story.

"And after they're dead the Angel Fire fills them with power."

Ellie frowned. *The Angel Fire?*

"In there." At'lon pointed to the small stone sanctuary at the far end of the courtyard. It was completely covered in water, including its top, as if it were a fountain. "Water above it, water below it, water all around it. Completely demon-proof." They sighed. "Then your parents opened a portal into the middle of it and sucked the Angel Fire right out."

So that's where the Angel Fire should be... Ellie thought in wonder. *But what's the point of it giving power to those angeling things? You said they're dead?*

"They are," At'lon said. "The angelings drop off the tree and die. Then the Angel Fire gives us *life*. And we are reborn with the power of a guardian angel."

The Angel Fire creates the guardians, Ellie realised. *So that's why Dyger wants the Angel Fire? So that no more guardians can be born?*

"Well, that's one of the reasons. But the main reason is that the Angel Fire gives us our powers. If Dyger gets it for himself *he* will take on those powers. He will be able to dimension hop, and he will be able to give his demons that power too."

What does that mean?

"Well, you know how The Green Man can open portals? So, he could in theory open a portal to the Angel Kingdom and you could step right through it. You as yourself, I mean, in your body. Not just your mind. Well, guardians don't need portals. We can dimension hop. We can pass through dimensions as we wish, because we're non-material. Now, demons are non-material too, but they don't have the power to dimension hop. The Angel Fire would give them that power."

And what does that ***actually*** *mean?* Ellie thought, trying to understand in practicalities.

"It means that the demons wouldn't be restricted to this dimension. They'd be able to hop through to any other dimension. Including *your* dimension. If you need it any clearer, they could come through to your world. They could come through to *any* world."

Chapter Sixteen:
Mrs Orange Argues With A Troll

That answered her question. And it didn't make her feel very good, no not one bit.

"It is time to take you back, now, Child. But I hope you understand the danger we are all in." And with that there was a *cracckk*, and everything went white.

Ellie felt like she was spinning and floating in a void, like in outer space, although everything was white. And then the fog cleared, and she was back in the girls' toilet in Peddleton Primary.

She was looking straight at herself.

Her body stood by the sinks, arms limp, eyes rolled up and showing the whites. Her mouth was a little ajar.

How long have I been standing there like that? she asked, suddenly worried about who might have come in and seen her.

"I told you: no time at all, in practical terms." And he touched her body's forehead, which was weird watching him do it. And then she felt a yanking sensation and her tummy flipped, and then she blinked rapidly and she was back in her own body, looking at At'lon.

The guardian president bowed. "I hope you enjoyed your visit to Angel Kingdom."

"*Enjoyed it?"* she hissed. "Take it out of me - the Angel Fire... *please*..."

"I told you, I cannot, even if I wanted to. It is not yours to give up."

"It should never have been mine in the first place!"

For some reason, At'lon started laughing. Really laughing. "True! But it is What Was Written, after all."

Ellie rolled her eyes, just like Chelsy would have done.

"Don't worry, Child," the guardian said. "Everything is under control." And then there was another *crack* and they were gone.

*

When Ellie got back to class they were still in a circle singing *London's Blummin' Burning*.

No one seemed to think she'd been gone an inordinate amount of time, so that was good.

Mrs Adisa said, "Chelsy, you can go to the toilet now."

But Chelsy said, "Oh, I don't need it anymore, Mrs Adisa," looking anxiously over at Ellie, mouthing *'What happened?'* at her.

Ellie really wished she'd stop, because she didn't really want anyone to see her best friend asking her what had happened in the toilet.

After another round, Mrs Adisa made a wild gesture, waving her arms and closing her hands to try and stop the singing, which she did. Except Finley wasn't paying attention so he sang, "*Pour on,"* before realising he was doing a solo and saving himself.

The class giggled, and Mrs Adisa told him to pay attention, though she did it with a smile.

Then for the rest of the music lesson they listened to Gustav Holst's *The Planets* on YouTube and wrote about how it made them feel.

Even though Ellie and Chelsy were sat next to each other they couldn't talk, because they were supposed to be listening to Gustav. Chelsy only had to look like she was going to say something and Mrs Adisa shushed her.

So then Chelsy wrote What did it say to you? in her book, and Ellie gave her a sharp look and rubbed it out straight away, because *What did it say to you?* is not an appropriate question to ask someone who has supposedly just gone to the toilet.

The last lesson of the day was science.

It was Chelsy's favourite, although you wouldn't have thought it. Year 6 were making posters of Charles Darwin, who had first realised that animals, including humans, had evolved from earlier animals. And Year 5 were drawing flowers and labelling them.

By this time, Ellie actually *did* need the toilet, but of course she couldn't ask to go again, so she'd just have to cross her legs.

Ellie and Chelsy's table was quite close to the bin, and Finley kept coming over to listen to their conversation under the guise of sharpening his pencil.

It made a change; Finley usually pretended they weren't related.

In hushed tones Ellie told them both what President At'lon had said, about the prophecy about the Orange girl from Peddleton village (Chelsy agreed it did seem very specific). About O'nair, the betrayer, who had left the guardians, joined Dyger, and told him that Ellie had the Angel Fire.

"He's a sneaky little git!" said Chelsy.

Actually, guardians are neither he nor she, thought Ellie, but she didn't say it because there was enough to explain as it was. So she told them about how demons and guardians can be killed by water, which they all agreed was weird.

Then she told them about the angelings that grew on a tree, and how guardians are born.

Lastly, she told them why Dyger wanted the Angel Fire.

"If he gets it he can dimension hop, which means the demons would be able to come through to *Earth*. Like, they would *invade*."

Ellie touched the scar on her wrist without thinking about it, and Chelsy twisted the purple scrunchie in her hair.

Then a voice from behind them said, "Are you talking about *Stranger Things?*"

It was Dan Hedges. He'd come to sharpen his pencil.

Chelsy blushed and started stammering, and Ellie rolled her eyes.

"I haven't seen the latest season yet," Dan said.

"I haven't seen any of them. Dad says I'm too young..." Chelsy blustered out.

Finley gave her a right weird look.

Dan raised his eyebrows. "Oh right. Never mind." He finished sharpening his pencil and left.

Chelsy clunked her head on the table. "*Why did I tell him Dad wouldn't let me watch it?* He's going to think I'm a baby..."

Finley started pouting and making kissing noises, and both girls slapped at him.

"That's a good point, though. How do they beat the monsters in *Stranger Things?*"

"I think the girl has magic powers."

"Oh." Ellie sighed. "Why doesn't the *Child of Destiny* come with magic powers? It's so unfair."

Both Finley and Chelsy rolled their eyes. There had been a lot of eye rolling in the past five minutes, as if they were having a competition.

Then Mrs Adisa said, "Finley, I'm sure your pencil is sharp enough, don't you? You can see your sister as much as you want at home."

He was *not* happy with that, and mumbled on his way back to his seat with the Year 5s grinning at him.

*

"I'm so stupid..." said Chelsy as they walked home.

"Why?"

"What I said to Dan. Soooo embarrassing."

Ellie rolled her eyes again. She couldn't help it.

Embarrassing? At Ellie's last birthday party, Finley had run around with her Peppa Pig pants on his *head*. *That* was embarrassing.

This? Nu-uh. This really *was* Chelsy being stupid.

"Ellie?" Chesly said. "I... I think I fancy Dan."

Ellie breathed out, exasperated. "I *know*, Chelsy. God."

Chelsy gasped theatrically. "*How?"*

"Maybe it's because you always *talk* about him? And when you actually talk *to* him you go all stupid."

"I don't!"

She definitely did.

Chelsy sighed. "Oh, what shall I *do?"*

And a little green face popped around her legs and said, "Isn't it obvious?"

The girls both screamed, and Chelsy very nearly booted the little wood elf into the road.

"Ooh, I'm sorry for startling you!" squeaked the woof elf. His voice was much higher than any of the others they'd seen. "I just overheard your problem and thought you might like some advice."

"Advice?" said Chelsy, breathing heavily. "From you?"

"Yes! As I said - isn't it obvious? You should ask him to marry you, of course!"

The girls looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

The little wood elf's face dropped. "What's the matter? Isn't that what you humans do when you're in *looove?*"

"She's not in love," said Ellie. "She's *eleven*. She's just got a little crush."

"So you don't want to marry him?" asked the wood elf.

And Chelsy made all kind of embarrassed noises and said, "*Noooo*," and "*puh*," and *"as if..."*

"Oh," said the wood elf. "Then I'm confused."

"Do you not have girl wood elves?" Ellie asked, and the wood elf frowned and said, "I *am* a girl wood elf," so that was awkward.

And then she ran off back into the woods.

Chelsy looked at Ellie and grimaced.

"How are we supposed to tell?" Ellie asked. "Their voices are all so high."

"They are *very* high," Chelsy agreed.

They didn't meet any other fantastical creatures on their walk home, although Ellie kept checking the hedgerow, as if expecting one of the bushes to jump out and say *boo*.

And when they got back to the Orange house they found Chris and Michelle drinking coffee in the kitchen. It was as if they didn't know what to do with themselves now they had no work to do, so they just sat around drinking coffee.

Michelle smiled in greeting at both of them. "Good day at school?"

"It was fine, yeah."

"Still nothing from your dad, Chelsy," Chris said as they dumped their school bags.

Chelsy looked disappointed. "Oh, okay."

"We'll phone the hospital after dinner if we still haven't heard anything." Michelle scooted her empty mug across the counter to the dirty mug collection above the dishwasher.

"Anything... weird happen?"

And that's when Finley stuck his head around the door - he must have beaten them home - and said gleefully, "A ghost came into our classroom and Ellie went into the girls' toilets with it." He sounded as if he thought she might get into trouble.

Michelle and Christopher both frowned, took a moment to digest what they'd just heard and then looked at each other.

"It wasn't a ghost, Mum. It was a guardian angel."

"Oh right." She threw up her hands. "Of course it was. Why not. And what exactly were you doing with this *guardian angel* in the girls' toilets?"

"Just talking."

"Chels, did you go?"

"No. Mrs Adisa wouldn't let me."

"And what did this thing say to you?"

Ellie didn't know whether to tell her parents the truth or not. Then she remembered that in every book she'd ever read or film she'd ever seen, the kids *never* told the parents what was going on. They always tried to deal with it on their own, and it always ended badly.

Well, that's not true. *In the end* the kids won - of course they did, in stories the hero always wins, it's not like they *die* - but wouldn't it have been so much easier if they'd just told the adults the *whole* truth and got them to help?

So Ellie told them everything. About the prophecy, about O'nair the Betrayer, about Dyger, about the Angel Fire and the angelings.

All of it.

By the end Michelle was up and pacing the room, looking furious, as if the red streaks in her hair were tongues of fire that might start smoking at any minute.

"So let's get this straight," she said. "These bloody guardian angels could have stopped us opening the portal - but instead they *let it happen*. They *let* the Angel Fire shoot into you. And then one of them - this *O'nads*..."

"O'nair," Chris said. "O'nair the Betrayer."

"Okay, *O'nair*. He goes and tells Dyger you've got it!"

"O'nair's not a *he*," Ellie mumbled, "but yes. Basically."

"And now this demon king is hunting you?"

Ellie looked from Chelsy to Finley. They were both pale. Her brother wasn't even making wisecracks anymore, as if seeing his mother so upset had frightened him.

"B-but the angel said everything would be okay, right?" Finley said in a small voice.

"Well that's okay then!" Michelle snapped, and she stormed from the room and slammed the door.

The rest of them looked at each other, not knowing what to say, and then Chris went after her - "Mish..." - and the kids followed too.

Mrs Orange stormed through the kitchen, wrenched open the bi-fold door with a grunt and marched across the back garden, screaming.

"Where are you, you little green weasels!"

It might have been 'weasels', anyway.

"Mum!"

"Mish... what are you doing?"

She was yelling at the bushes in the patio border. "Where's your leader, eh? *I want a word with him*..."

"Mum, stop..."

She booted the begonias, kicking the purple flowers across the grass. Her Croc flew off and she started cursing.

"Where are you you little imps!"

Christopher padded over to her in his slippers and put a hand on her arm. "Michelle, I don't think..."

"I don't care what you *think*, Christopher. I am going to talk to one of these *things* about our *daughter!"* And she shoved her bare foot back into her Croc and stomped across the grass to the trees.

"Oh God," Ellie whispered, as they followed Mrs Orange across the garden.

"Are you real?" she asked a tree, kicking it. "Are you alive?"

"Well technically it *is* alive..."

"*Oh shut* ***up****, Christopher!"* She broke off a branch and began whacking it through the undergrowth, crying, "Where are you, you greenies!" and "Where is that *bush?"*

Christopher just followed her around, bemused, saying her name again and again, and not knowing whether he should try and grab the stick or not.

Then Chelsy gasped and whispered, "*Ellie..."* She pointed.

It was a troll.

It was standing watching Mr and Mrs Orange, who had their backs to it.

How long it had been there they had no idea.

Then it started walking over, completely silent, which must have been some kind of miracle given its size.

Eventually Michelle saw it, and she screamed, and started waving the branch at it. Chris jumped and turned round, started screaming too, pulling his wife backwards onto the grass.

"Mum, Dad, it's okay!" Ellie yelled. "It's just a troll!"

"*Is that a good thing?"* Christopher asked.

"It's not a bad thing to be a troll," said the troll.

They all stopped their shrieking and screaming and wild movements at the sound of the troll's voice. He was a Cockney. He sounded like he should be selling used cars, or on the set of *Eastenders.*

Michelle, clutching her chest, said, "Why do you sound like Ray Winstone?"

This made Christopher feel weird because, unbeknownst to the girls, Michelle had had a crush on Ray Winstone in the '90s, and he hoped she wouldn't develop a crush on this troll, though he admitted it unlikely.

"I used to live in Victoria Park," said the troll, picking at some of the blue moss covering his tummy. "Me and the wife moved up here in '93. Ain't been back to London since."

What were you supposed to say to that?

Michelle whisked her hair aside and gathered herself. "How dare you put my daughter in danger!"

The troll shrugged. "Nothin to do with me, Love. Only thing I have to worry about is whether there's enough potassium in the soil."

"What? *No*..." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Don't distract me with science. We are talking about my daughter, and how *you lot* let the Angel Fire go into her."

"You lot? What do you mean 'you lot'?"

"You lot! You weird little invisible creatures..."

"I didn't have anything to do with it, Love, I already told you."

"Stop calling me *Love!*" She blushed. Probably thinking of Ray Winstone.

Christopher saw it and frowned. "E-Ellie told us you could have stopped the portal from opening..."

"Me? How? I don't know anything about it, other than you opened it somehow and the Angel Fire shot out."

"Not *you* personally!" Michelle yelled.

"Well stop saying *you* then, as if we're all the same. Stop blaming me for things I ain't done."

Michelle groaned and stomped on the grass. "*They*, then. *They* could have stopped it."

"The guardians could have stopped it, yes," agreed the troll. "Some tried, by all accounts. But the senate ruled as it did. I understand your anger, Mrs Orange, I do. They let young Eleanor receive the Angel Fire, putting her in danger. But the way I see it, even if they'd stopped it all, she would *still* be in danger, because the whole world would be in danger. Dyger would have taken over Angel Kingdom and got the Angel Fire that way. Then he'd have invaded Earth. It is What Was Written. At least this way there's a chance of beating him."

"We *can* beat him, then?" Ellie asked.

And the troll said, "Oh yes. The guardians know What Was Written. They know what to do, for the good of this dimension and all the rest."

Chapter Seventeen:
The Strange Case Of Peter Stiddin

After they got back to the house, Michelle grabbed her purse and said, "Kids, we're going out. Finley, you too. Come on."

"W-Where are you going?" Christopher asked, concerned. But when Michelle told him he nodded and said, "Okay. Good idea. Get the best ones you can. And as many as you can."

So they went to the supermarket and bought a total of fourteen, and they filled them and scattered them about the house, which would raise a few eyebrows if anyone stopped by unexpectedly.

Whilst they were gone Chris had set up a few contingencies of his own, which he explained to them in a serious, low voice, although there wasn't much to explain.

And then Ellie had a bath before dinner. Her mum didn't like her being up there by herself, but Ellie was of the age now where baths were definitely private affairs (not like Finley, who was still only nine, and who was always running around with nothing on).

She lay back, suds up to her chin, feeling safe in the water, looking up at the showerhead pinned to the wall and thinking, *If a demon tries to get me in here, I'll just turn the shower on and blast them.*

She felt so safe in that bath that she really didn't want to get out, and only did so reluctantly, on hearing her mother's voice calling for dinner. She was thoroughly pruned by this time, and her scar seemed to blaze pink on her wrist.

She dried herself and dressed in joggers and a comfy pyjama top with Minnie Mouse's head on.

Dinner was chicken pie and mash. The pie went in the oven and the mash went in the microwave, along with some vegetables in a packet.

And as they ate hardly anyone said a word. Nor did they as they stacked the dishwasher.

And then Chris said, "I'll phone the hospital now. See what's happening with your dad, Chels."

And so he did.

And what the hospital told him made no sense.

Peter Stiddin had already been discharged. He'd left the hospital more than two hours ago.

*

"He's not answering," Chris said, holding his mobile to his ear and pacing the kitchen.

"This makes no sense," Chelsy said, her eyes still red. There'd been a few tears, of course, but Ellie thought her best friend had held it together pretty darn well.

At some point Finley had taken himself off to his room, probably to play on his Playstation. Ellie didn't resent him. He'd been stuck in the corner not knowing what to do, or what to say to Chelsy, because although they'd grown up together and even been on holiday a couple of times she was still a girl, and he still mostly thought of her as *Ellie's friend*.

"I think I better phone my mum," Chelsy said. "I mean, I can't believe she'll have heard anything, but..." she shrugged.

Chelsy's mum and dad had got divorced a few years ago. Her mum lived with her new husband and stepson, and ever since Covid she'd barely seen Chelsy at all, as if lockdown had been the excuse she needed to focus on her new family.

Michelle started nodding. "Okay, Chels. Are you okay to do it or do you want me to speak to her?"

"No, I'll do it," Chelsy said, swallowing. She pressed a few buttons on her Nokia 105 and after a brief moment where Ellie thought she might change her mind, she pressed the call button.

Chelsy put the phone to her ear and waited.

Ellie felt her stomach sink a little, which always happened when she thought of Chelsy's mother, and how she'd basically abandoned her daughter because a new man had come along.

Maybe it wasn't that simple.

Or maybe it was.

Then, when it looked like she wouldn't answer, there was small and tinny "Hello?" through the phone's speaker.

"Hi Mum. It's me. Chelsy."

But she must know that, Ellie thought. *Surely she must have Chelsy's number saved?*

Chelsy's mother paused. "Chelsy, hi. What can I do for you?"

What can I do for you?

Michelle and Chris shot a glance. They could obviously hear well enough too.

"I, er, was wondering if you've heard from Dad?"

"Why would I have heard from your father?"

Chelsy nodded to herself. "So you haven't heard from him today."

"No. Why - what's he done?"

"Nothing, Mum." Sighed it.

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then Chelsy's mother said, "So... are you okay?"

"I... I'm fine."

"Good. *Xander, get the trays out for me!"* she yelled offstage.

Xander was Chelsy's fourteen-year-old stepbrother. Ellie had never met him.

Then: "Well, I'm just getting dinner ready, so..."

Chelsy looked at Ellie, rolled her eyes and gave a shake of her head. "Yeah, okay, Mum. Nice speaking to you too." Then she hung up.

As far as Chelsy knew, that was the first time since the divorce that she'd hung up first. Every other conversation they'd had had been ended by her mother.

Hanging up felt good, as if it held power.

She half expected her mother to phone back and have a go at her - *"How dare you hang up on me?"* - Chelsy might even have welcomed the attention.

But her mother didn't, because her mother wasn't, not really. She was just a woman who had given birth to her at some time in the past.

They were all on tenterhooks for the rest of the evening. They tried to watch some TV together, just the four of them (Finley was still in his room), but Ellie couldn't even tell you what programme it was, let alone what happened.

Eventually the girls said goodnight and took Rex upstairs to bed.

Ellie cleaned her teeth first, changed into her pyjamas and then lay on top of the bed with Rex curled up on her tummy whilst Chelsy showered.

Where was Peter?

None of this made sense. He wouldn't just leave the hospital and go missing. Which meant something had happened to him. And she felt sick with worry for Chels.

Neither of them spoke after they'd said goodnight.

What could be said? Just well-meaning lies, that's all.

It had started to rain, the first rain they'd had for a few days, and Ellie thought of the guardians and demons out there, probably sheltering underground to avoid it, and she wondered if she was safe now, at least for a while.

Ellie drifted in and out of sleep, and she dreamed of trolls, and wood elves, and fairies, and the floating land masses of Angel Kingdom. But she also dreamed of darkness, and Gloom, and flying shadows, and monsters with fang-covered heads.

And then at 3:32am according to her phone, she sat bolt upright.

Rex was curled up at the foot of the bed, and she could hear Chelsy's shallow breathing. At least her friend had managed to fall asleep, finally.

Then Ellie heard footsteps going down the stairs.

That's what must have awoken her.

Mum, Dad, or Finley?

For some reason she felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle and her scar started to itch.

She got out of bed and padded barefoot to the door.

The landing was dark and deserted, but she heard a voice coming from the kitchen.

It was her dad's voice, although she couldn't hear what he was saying.

Who was he talking to at this time of night?

She crept down the stairs, as quietly as she could, until she could pick out words.

"I am ready. It is time."

He was in the kitchen, talking on the phone. He had his back to her, little more than a silhouette in the moonlight.

She crept closer, part of her wanting to call out, to ask what he was doing. The other part kept her silent.

"Two of the others are already here with me."

Two of what? Two who?

Then he said, "*She is asleep. Yes, it will be* ***easy****. Bring the rest."*

What? The words echoed round Ellie's head.

Then her father hung up. He turned round and he saw her standing there in the hall, like a spectre.

And his eyes were completely black.

Chapter Eighteen:
Dad?

"I... I was just getting some water..." Ellie stammered, because that's what everyone did in the movies. Get up in the middle of the night and get a glass of water.

Her father, the one with the black eyes, he said, "Do not lie to me. People in real life do not get up in the middle of the night and go down to the kitchen and drink a glass of water. It is make-believe."

Actually, some people probably *do* do that, but Ellie had never been one of them.

"D-Dad," she mumbled, "I just came down t-to get a d-drink..."

He just stared at her with his black eyes, as if he were an alien species. He was her dad, but he also wasn't. He was something else entirely.

He said. "Come on then."

"W-what?"

"Come over here and get a drink." And his eyes bored into her like iron.

"I'm not thirsty." She managed to take a step back. Her legs felt like she'd run a marathon.

She noticed that it had stopped raining outside, and that made everything worse.

Christopher Orange took a step towards her. He smiled. Moonlight and shadow danced across his face. "Where are you going? It's me. It's your dear father."

But it wasn't her dear father, not really. She didn't know how, or why, or when, but she knew that much.

Ellie whimpered like a frightened puppy. The sound came out strangled.

She managed another step back, and her heel touched the bucket that had been placed under the side table in the hall. Just for an occasion like this.

Placed, ironically, by Christopher Orange himself.

"He is *dying* to meet you," said her father, and as his smile widened two shadow shapes rose up out of the floor, one either side of him. "My friends," he said to the shadows. "We have waited so long for this."

They looked a bit like floating stingrays made of black fog, but with several tails instead of one. They shifted this way and that, faceless and formless, twining and winding and whispering. Without mouths they were whispering.

Their long ink-black tendrils stretched out towards her, knocking a glass over, sweeping the coffee machine aside.

Ellie screamed. She screamed louder than she'd ever screamed before, and it must have shocked her out of her stupor. She grabbed the bucket of water and threw it into the kitchen.

The demons (for she knew they were demons, the same ones she'd seen escape from the portal and disappear through the laboratory roof), they moved as quick as lightning, as quick as e*lectricity*, it seemed, disappearing through the floor before the water could reach them.

Christopher was not that quick, though. The water hit him full in the face, and he stumbled back and then slipped and went down on the tiles.

Ellie dropped the bucket, horrified by what she'd done.

And then her father looked up at her, and his eyes were normal - they were *normal!* - and he said, "*Run*..."

The next moment his eyes were black again, black like outer space, and he gritted his teeth and pulled himself to his feet and roared as water dripped from the walls and the windows and the ceiling behind him.

Ellie ran.

*

"Mum! *MUUUMMM!*"

She already heard doors opening upstairs, no doubt because of her scream and the *sloosshhh* from the bucket of water, which must have been tremendous.

"*The demons are here! They've got Dad!*" And she grabbed at the thing on the sideboard - a water blaster, one of fourteen placed around the house - and ran up the stairs towards the others.

The landing light was on, and she could see her mum, and Chelsy, and Finley looking down with wide eyes and open mouths, and she screamed at them again, "*Demons!*"

And then they saw Christopher Orange, and he was galloping down the hall on all fours like a hyena. He swung on the newel post at the foot of the stairs and stared up at them with his black, black eyes, and they all screamed, and Michelle said the F-word, and Rex started barking from somewhere, probably Ellie's room.

And Ellie was running up the stairs, panting, screaming, the water blaster clunking on each step as she ran. *Clunk clunk clunk.*

How long was this staircase?

Then her mum got her own legs working, and she ran forward and grabbed Ellie and hauled her up by her pyjama top.

Christopher was coming up the stairs on all fours, his mouth ajar. Michelle grabbed the water pistol from Ellie and sprayed it on him, in his face, in his mouth, but that didn't stop him so she threw the water blaster at him.

It donked off the top of his head.

Christopher yelled, fell down flat on the steps, and then raised his head again, glowering at them all.

He had a massive cut on his forehead.

"*In here*." Michelle ushered them into the family bathroom and then locked the door.

There was a water blaster on the drying rack and Finley grabbed it.

"The demons can pass through walls," Ellie said in a small voice.

"Turn on the shower," Michelle said. "Now!" Then she ran to the free standing bath and began filling it.

Ellie leaned into the large walk-in shower and turned it on, both the large waterfall showerhead mounted to the ceiling and the spray hose.

"Get in! All of you."

"Into the shower?"

"Yes! Finley, keep your pyjamas on."

There came a knock on the bathroom door, and Christopher said, "Hello? Can I come in? I need a poo."

They didn't reply.

Rex had stopped barking, and Ellie hoped that only meant he'd gone back to sleep.

"Hello? I'm desperate."

Michelle slowly put a finger to her lips. *Don't answer.*

And then two shadows erupted through the wall.

They all screamed as the wall cabinet burst, and glass flew over their heads, and aerosols, and make-up tubes, and cans of shaving foam tinkered to the bathroom tiles and burst like bombs.

One of the demons ruptured Michelle's ginger hair dye, and it sprayed out and covered Chelsy, her face, her hair, her chest, and the girl fell down, screaming that she'd been shot.

Finley started spraying the water blaster all around the bathroom, but the demons just darted and dodged, and he ended up spraying everyone else, including himself.

Ellie was sure the demons were laughing. Teasing them. Mocking them.

She lunged into the shower, grabbing the hose and wrenching it from its holder. Then she turned to look out at the chaos in the bathroom.

Finley was spinning on the spot, spraying the water pistol up into the air, screaming. Chelsy was on her knees, rubbing at her face, which had been dyed orange.

A demon lashed out a tendril, shoving Michelle backwards, and she topped into the bath and sat there, sprawled in the water like a drunk woman.

And Ellie stood beneath the shower water and said *Oh my God Oh my God Oh my God* to herself, over and over, clutching the hose accessory and seemingly unaware of how wet she now was.

She only managed to move when a demon loomed above Chelsy, six black tendrils unfurling - no, seven - *no;* that one was its tail - and Ellie ran to the edge of the shower tray and aimed the hose at the demon above Chelsy's head.

The demon spiralled away as Chelsy crawled blindly into the shower cubicle, raising her face to the running water, which turned orange in the shower tray as it washed dye from her hair and face.

And then the bathroom door burst open, and Chris stood in the threshold, looking much bigger and scarier than Ellie remembered. He scanned the room with his black eyes and *tsk tsked.* "What a *mess*," he said.

The demons drifted to their places either side of him, like guards. They stopped their hiss-like laughing.

"Finley, put the water pistol down, there's a good boy. And Michelle, get out of the bath. Your ass is wet."

Finley dropped the water blaster.

Michelle pulled herself out of the bath. She had a dark patch the size of a skirt on her pyjama bottoms.

"And girls, turn off the shower."

Ellie didn't move. Maybe she couldn't.

Christopher sighed. He had a large bloody gash on his forehead. Then he walked over, leaned into the cubicle and turned off the water. Ellie and Chelsy both flinched away from him, hunkered in the corner, holding each other.

He cocked his head at Chelsy and said, "Hmm. You look like Donald Trump."

Ellie knew he had been president of the United States once (and hopefully never again).

"*C-Christopher,"* Michelle spat. "What are you *doing?"*

And Chris smiled at her, at his wife. "Sorry. Christopher's not here at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Why are your eyes ***black****?"* Michelle started crying. "Please... don't hurt them..."

"I'm not going to hurt anyone," he said. "We're going to go down to the lounge and wait for my friend to arrive."

"Dad, I know you're in there," Ellie said, thinking about that moment in the kitchen where he'd briefly come back. When he'd told her to *run*.

Christopher stared at her. "Okay. I will make this simple. Either, you come down and wait with me in the lounge. *Orrrr*," and he gestured to the two demons hovering at his shoulders, "my friends will possess you. And they will *make* you come down with me to the lounge."

Possessed. That's what he was.

Ellie remembered the streak of black shooting out of the portal and smacking him in the chest, knocking him over. It was a demon, and it had shot into him. And now it had finally possessed him.

"*Now!"* Christopher roared, and they all jumped. And then Michelle trudged forward, taking Finley by the shoulders, and then reaching out for Ellie and Chelsy.

"Mum..." Ellie whispered, taking her mum's hand.

"It's a-alright... come on." Michelle looked her husband full in the face and said, "Okay. We'll come with you."

"Good." Christopher led them out of the bathroom, between the demons, who followed behind them all. "You really don't need to be scared."

No one said anything. They *were* scared, obviously. Stupid demon man.

The one good thing was that Rex was standing just outside Ellie's bedroom door, wagging his tail.

Chelsy saw him and stifled back a sob. "*Bed*," she said, in a strong voice, and dutifully Rex obeyed, trotting back into the bedroom.

That was something at least. The demons hadn't eaten the dog.

"Who are we waiting for?" Michelle asked, her voice shaking.

"Oh, you'll see soon enough. It shouldn't be too..."

And that's when Michelle lunged forward and pushed her husband down the stairs.

She threw all her weight behind it, and it caught him totally by surprise. His feet went airborne, and he flailed his arms, and Ellie watched as if it were in slow motion.

And that's when the thick vines of black smoke shot out of him. Two of them, three, from his chest, and they hooked into the wall and ceiling, and suddenly he wasn't falling anymore. He swung on these smoking tendrils like Tarzan, swung right back up to the landing and appeared in front of them.

Ta da!

He glowered at Michelle, as the smoke tendrils withdrew back into him, as the other two demons pulsed in rage overhead.

"That is no way to treat your husband," he growled.

Michelle raised her head and spat, "You are not my husband."

Christopher smiled.

And then he pinned her against the wall and kissed her.

Michelle tried to push him away, tried to turn her head, but he was too strong. And Ellie felt an overwhelming revulsion in the pit of her stomach, because this wasn't her father kissing her mother, it was a demon, and she ran forward and began pummelling his back.

Christopher pushed her aside with a growl, but at least he'd let go of her mum.

"Get downstairs," he growled. "All of you." And he pulled them to the stairs.

They went down numbly, step-by-step, first Ellie, then Chelsy, then Finley, then Michelle, and lastly Christopher.

The demons floated down. Ellie could feel them, and the scar on her wrist had started to itch so bad it was as if something wanted to get out, something wanted to escape, and...

Oh my God...

The Angel Fire. The Angel Fire wanted to get out, to smash these demons! And she was pretty sure it would blast the demon out of her dad, too!

She *knew* the Child of Destiny must develop special powers, or else what would be the point of being the Child of Destiny? *None, right?*

So she rubbed at the scar, then she touched each of the seven points of the star. And then she wheeled round and said, "Hey Dad, *eat this.*"

She knew it would work, just *knew* it in her gut.

And she clenched her left fist, clenched it *so hard*, and then she threw out her hand as quickly as she could, as if going in for a handshake. And the Angle Fire would shoot out of the scar in a blinding flash of light, *light from a star*, and it would illuminate them all, and the demons would

disintegrate, including the one possessing her father, and they'd all be saved.

Any moment now.

She clenched every muscle in her body, willing the light, willing the Fire.

Nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

Christopher just frowned at her and said, "Get in the lounge."

No... No!

She tried again, throwing out her hand, even harder this time. Again, nothing.

Chelsy took her wrist and said, "What are you doing?"

"Move!" yelled her dad, and she had no choice.

"I was sure it would work..." Ellie whispered, but only to herself.

She moved slowly down the hall, making squelching footprints on the floorboards. They all did. They were all soaked through.

Then, before they'd reached the lounge, Ellie saw a shadow fill the thin stained windows in the front door.

There was a knock, and Christopher said, "Oh... that was quicker than I expected."

And then the door burst inwards off its hinges, slamming into the hall wall and sticking there.

At the threshold was a surprisingly small figure.

It obviously wasn't who Christopher had been expecting, because he said, "What the..."

In fact, it hadn't been who *anyone* was expecting.

It was Aunt Cathy.