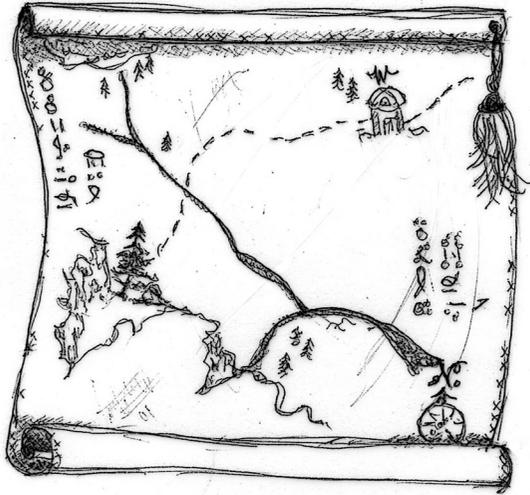


Chapter One



the Birthday Present

“So...your dead grandfather left you a map for your birthday, huh?” Tarc said as he led Daz out of the stall, the early morning sun shining through the open barn door. “What kind of a present is that?”

“Depends on where it leads,” Kief replied, pulling his saddle off the wood-planked wall.

Tarc grabbed a brush from the dusty shelf and stroked Daz’s back. “He’s been dead for years, why’d your grandma wait until now to give it to you?”

“She said he didn’t want me to have it until I was ready to leave for academy.” Kief threw the saddle onto his horse Natch. His sorrel coat was thickening with the changing seasons. “Good boy,” he said, rubbing the white blaze down Natch’s forehead.

“Anything else with it?” Tarc was hoping for something big





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as this was Kief's last birthday before leaving home. Tarc never received much on his birthdays. His father was killed in a mining accident when he was a boy, so Kief shared everything with him. He always rode one of Kief's horses when they went out exploring, and even the coat he was wearing was a hand-me-down from Kief's father.

Kief reached under Natch's belly for the girth strap. "Nope, just the map," he replied.

"It's a bit strange don't you think...the map?" Tarc grabbed his saddle with one hand and easily tossed it up on Daz's back.

"You know the stories I've told you about my grandpa." Kief had often rehearsed to Tarc all about the amazing things his grandpa had in his study; the telescope, maps of the moons and stars, tidal charts, an altimant and brass compass for navigation... staying up late into the evenings, listening to his grandpa's tales of adventure as a young sailor. He would get lost in play, charting his own imaginary course through monster-filled waters to lands never seen by man when his grandpa worked, studying and writing. And it was his grandfather that had instilled in him a love for the sea, though it was more of an awakening than anything else. "I still remember like it was yesterday, my grandpa helping me hold the altimant to my eye and teaching me how to take a sight..."

"Okay, okay," Tarc said, not in the mood for another story about Kief's grandpa. He finished saddling Daz and turned to Kief, hitching his thumbs in his pockets. "Well, let's have a look."

Kief pulled the map out of the satchel that he always carried slung over his shoulder. The heavy paper curled stubbornly as he unrolled it. He held it up like a trophy, smiling ear to ear. "Something huh?"

The paper's texture was just like the old maps his grandpa used. Leather was stitched around all four edges with a long leather

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tassel tied to the top right corner. Strange worn characters and symbols covered the page.

Tarc cocked his head to one side. “Now if it were only written in a language we could understand,” he said, running his thick fingers through his curly blond hair.

“Well, I don’t know what this weird writing is, but the map is on the back.” Kief flipped it over. They both stared. Kief pointed to a symbol at the start of a path that wandered down the page. “That looks like a lantern there so I packed one, just in case.”

“It better not take until dark to find” — Tarc paused for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders — “whatever it is we’re looking for. I’m not traipsing around the forest all day with you.”

“It shouldn’t take that long. Look” — Kief tapped the paper with his finger — “see this? The path leads from the West Fire Tower through the forest to the southern cliffs.”

“Yeah, that’s easy enough, but it ends at this tree,” Tarc said. “There are hundreds of trees up there, how do we know which one it is?”

“It’s next to these two stacked things, I think they’re rocks.” Kief tilted his head.

Tarc looked closer and then rolled his eyes at Kief. “You do know there are more rocks than trees up there, right?”

“I don’t know,” Kief said. “I guess we’ll just have to see when we get there.”

“Well, I still don’t get why the crazy old hoot wanted to send you off into the forest to follow a map that doesn’t tell us anything at all.”

“Hey, watch how you talk about my grandpa.” Kief punched Tarc’s burly arm, who only grinned and flexed his muscles. He loved ruffling Kief’s feathers to get a scuffle out of him, but this morning Kief was too occupied with his map to get much



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of a rise. “Besides,” he continued, “the adventure is part of the gift.”

“Well, I guess we’d better get going before we have to use that lantern,” Tarc said and turned for the door.

They rode up the cobble stone roads winding through the mountain village of Shaflann Bucken. The hooves of their horses clopped loudly in the early morning stillness. A scent of dewy pines, and smoke streaming from the myriad of rooftops, swirled in the air.

It was the middle of Harvest Rhythm and the red and brown leaves had already begun to drop. Kief turned up the collar of his sheep skin coat. Harvest Rhythm was his favorite season, and there was no place he’d rather be than on his horse, Natch, in the forest. He gazed up at the West Fire Tower as they lobbed alongside, its oil soaked beams weathered grey with age. Every year another coat of oil was washed on for protection from rot in the heavy rainfall and harsh seasons of the mountains.

Crossing over a stream, they entered the forest. Sunlight poured into the thick pines, bouncing off the dense cover of needles and boughs of the trees, so that by the time it trickled down to the floor, only a few spots of light remained, leaving the great bases of the pines black and the forest covered in shadow.

Kief chuckled to himself as he thought of his grandfather putting together the little adventure for him. A couple of years earlier, he and Tarc would have felt like they were going on a real expedition. But he supposed that his grandpa had left him some small treasure at the end of the trail. Probably something useful for academy — after all, he didn’t want him to have it until he went away. Perhaps his own altimant or compass, or a new spectascope, one with enough power to see the craters on the moons. An atlas of Fundautum would be good to take with him.

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Kief didn't say much to Tarc as they rode, and Tarc didn't care, both preferring the silence as they rocked side-to-side atop their horses to the rhythm of the soft thud of hooves on the forest floor.

Perched on the limb of a dead tree, a crow cawed as the wind whistled through its branches. A rich smell of moist soil and decaying leaves rose from the ground. Giant pines swayed gently like giant swings, back and forth, back and forth, and the distinct chill before the snows would fly blew on Kief's face. He shivered at the thought — it wouldn't be long now.

Emerging from the forest, they reached the cliffs, the grey granite extending straight up so high they couldn't see the top. Small patches of tall brown grass, growing in spots on the rock-face, fluttered in the wind. He had been to the peaks many times, spending days exploring each canyon that led to the cliff tops. At times, strong currents blew up from the valley below creating marvelous thunderstorms, the updrafts so strong that Kief felt if he jumped off he would shoot right back up again.

As they followed along the base of the cliffs, they looked for a lone tree and stacked rocks like the drawings on the map.

Tarc sighed. "Why couldn't he be more specific? There are rocks and trees everywhere."

"We'll find it," Kief replied, waving a careless hand at him.

Throughout the morning, Tarc let out grumbles and sighs until finally he declared, "I've had enough!"

"Come on, we can't just quit. My grandpa put a lot into this."

"He's dead, he's not gonna care," Tarc said, throwing his hands in the air.

"Like you have anything better to do anyway."

"The fish are jumping on Lake Shandon, that's better..."

"They'll be there tomorrow," Kief said and kept riding.

Tarc followed, but stopped looking. He'd resigned himself



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to enjoying the ride while Kief searched for clues and examined every tree and rock along the way. Occasionally Kief would pull out his map again to study it.

Around midday, Kief spotted a particularly peculiar stack of rocks. “Is that it?” he exclaimed.

“Well, have we found another mound of rocks like this anywhere? Of course that’s it,” Tarc replied, jamming his hands in his pockets.

“You’re all grown up and boring now,” Kief said and swung down off his horse.

“Hey, if we were on a real treasure hunt that would be great.” Tarc climbed down slowly and stretched his back. “But we don’t even know if there *is* a treasure!”

“Where’s your imagination?”

“I guess it went...I dunno, somewhere,” he said.

Kief ignored him and unrolled his map. His eyes became small as he concentrated. “I think that’s the tree there...,” he said, pointing at a tall lone pine in front of them. “And —”

“Yeah, yeah, but we need more clues than that!” Tarc said.

Kief continued to ignore him and went back to studying the map when a flash of shadow passed over them. And again. Swoosh! The shadow dove at them nearly taking Kief’s head off. And then the map was gone, ripped from his hands, the leather tassel caught in the beak of a huge black raptor, the map fluttering behind him. They watched in astonishment as the eagle carried away the map.

“After him!” Kief shouted.

Jumping on their horses, they chased the eagle; leaping over old fallen trees and dodging boulders. The great black bird flew along the tree line and then banked and disappeared into the cliffs.

“Where’d it go?” Kief said in a panic.

“I saw it, I saw...,” Tarc said, “it went behind those cliffs there!”

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Hidden within the rock, they were surprised to find a narrow pass they'd never noticed before. Riding up the tight canyon single file, swiveling their heads back and forth, they searched the walls and sky. Kief broke the branch off a scraggly, half-dead tree for something to throw at the bird when it showed itself.

Then the canyon ended abruptly.

Kief turned Natch around to face Tarc. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know but that bird seems to be as crazy about that map as you. I'd get rid of the stick, you might wanna keep him."

"Ha! Ha! Real funny. We've gotta find him," he said, and chucked the stick at Tarc.

A cry of the eagle pierced their ears and Kief immediately regretted wasting his stick on Tarc. He spun around and looked up to see it on the ledge above them, flapping its wings as if to taunt them.

Kief jumped off Natch and scrambled up the cliff. The climb was steep but there were good hand holds in the jagged rocks. Reaching the ledge, he stood still, staring.

Tarc came huffing up behind him, but stopped short when he reached Kief. "Whoa, a cave," he exclaimed, his voice echoing through the black hole and back out into the canyon.

In front of them, on the ground, lay the map, but the eagle was gone.

"That bird was huge! I think it grazed my head," Kief said and swiped his fingers over his scalp to check for blood.

Tarc walked across the flat, pebbly ground in front of the entrance and picked up the map. "Do you think your grandpa knew about this?" he asked, peering into the cave.

"I didn't see anything on the map that looked like a cave...did you?" Kief wiped his perspiring brow and unbuttoned his coat.

Tarc had completely removed his and had it wadded under



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his arm. “Nope, I might have been a little more excited if I had,” he said, looking into the blackness. “But it looks like we’re gonna need that lantern.”

“I’ll get it,” Kief said and climbed back down the rocky ledge to fetch it.

“What do you think is in there?” Tarc asked when Kief returned.

“I don’t know, but I sure want to find out!” Kief anxiously lit the lantern and stepped into the cave.

The entrance was a little taller than their heads and about as wide as it was tall. The tunnel widened as they walked tentatively into the darkness, straining their eyes to see beyond the reach of the lantern light. The walls were smooth and damp and it smelled like an underground food cellar. There were a few loose stones along the path but it was mostly clear. The light from the entrance slowly faded as the path gradually sloped downward for about fifty paces and then suddenly opened up into a spectacular cavern.

“WOW!” Tarc shouted out as Kief held up the lantern.

Magnificent glistening formations hung from the ceiling and shot up from the floor. Milky crystals covered the roof of the cave. Mounds like hardened mud dotted the ground. They walked under what looked like a petrified sea creature with hundreds of tentacles reaching down to entangle them.

Kief spun slowly, taking it all in. He took mental notes of the cave to record in his explorer’s journal, the place where he documented all of his expeditions. Most of them were insignificant, a new canyon or fresh spring, but writing them down made Kief feel like he was a real explorer. The cave surpassed all of his discoveries a hundred times over.

The cavern was roughly triple his height and about seventy paces long by thirty paces wide. At a low spot in one of the corners they found a small opening leading to another passageway.



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Tarc agreed that they should return with more equipment to explore it.

Coming around a stalagmite toward the rear of the cavern, Kief tripped.

“What’s this?” He crouched down, setting the lantern on the ground. A small wooden chest with iron bands and two iron latches lay invitingly. There was no lock.

“Well, what do you know, there really is a treasure!” Tarc slapped Kief excitedly.

Kief ran his fingers over the chest, his heart was pounding. The wood was smooth with a worn oil finish.

“This can’t be my grandpa’s treasure though. The map said nothing about a cave...”

At that, Tarc laughed. “As far as I can read, that map hasn’t said anything that I can understand.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t read so good, do ya?” Kief replied.

“Aren’t you gonna open it?” Tarc asked, giving Kief a nudge.

Kief handed the lantern to Tarc, the lamplight casting long black shadows on the walls, their breathing sounding heavy in the silent cave. He unlatched the lid. The iron was cold and damp. The hinges creaked and sputtered as he opened it. Peering inside, the chest was empty except for a small leather pouch sitting in the center. Kief reached inside. He could feel that it held something thick and solid.

Tarc fidgeted. “Come on, come on.”

Loosening the drawstring and upturning the bag, Kief dumped the contents into his hand. Out slipped a single polished white stone about the size of his palm. It was an oval flat shape, smooth and white, the whitest stone Kief had ever seen. He tilted his head as he turned it over in his hand a few times.

“Huh,” he muttered, bewildered at the treasure.



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“A rock? Who would go to all the trouble of hiding that? Some treasure that is.” Tarc gave a disappointed sigh.

“It must be something important. Else why would it have been hidden here?”

“Sure, I guess it’s about the best skipping stone I’ve ever seen. Or maybe a good paper weight,” Tarc said, shaking his head.

“I like it,” Kief said, staring at the treasure.

“Well, I don’t and I’m starved.” Tarc plopped down on the smooth floor, pulling his lunch out of his satchel, his disappointment about the treasure overshadowing the excitement he’d had about discovering the cave.

Kief joined him. He set the stone down and pulled out his lunch. It almost glowed in the dark it was so white.

“Let me see that thing,” Tarc finally asked. He reached out his hand and Kief handed it over to him. “Humph, I guess it’s kind of a clever little rock...”

“I think it is,” Kief said, snatching it back from him and slipping it into the pouch. As he did so, he noticed something else inside. It was a folded note. “Hey, this is my grandfather’s insignia,” he said, pointing at a symbol on the paper.

“How do you know that?”

“He had it on everything. He stamped all his books and maps with it.”

“Well, what does it say?”

Kief unfolded the small note and read it. “Keep the oath.”

“That’s it? What’s that supposed to mean?” Tarc asked, a mouth full of beef sandwich.

“I don’t know,” Kief replied, staring at the rock. He looked at Tarc and shook a finger at him. “You can’t tell anyone about this, got it?”

“Right, what am I gonna say?” Tarc asked, his mouth still full

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of sandwich. “Kief’s grandpa hid a little white rock in a cave.” He took another bite, bigger than his cheeks could hold. “Who’s gonna care?”

“My grandfather,” Kief replied. “He knew about the cave and hid it here. But I still can’t figure it out, there’s no cave on the map.”

“Maybe those funny symbols say something about it,” Tarc said and wiped his mouth with his arm.

“Could be.” Kief shrugged.

They finished eating and searched the rest of the cavern for more treasure but didn’t find anything. Finally, Kief placed the pouch with the stone in his satchel and they walked back up the tunnel to the entrance.

Stepping out into the blinding sun, they blinked and squinted until their eyes stopped hurting. It was a clear, crisp day and they could just make out the time tower in the center of High Valley far below.

Kief scanned the sky for the eagle but there was no sign of it. All his time in the mountains exploring with Tarc, they’d never seen an eagle like it. Climbing down from the ledge to their horses, Kief unrolled his map one last time to make sure he wasn’t missing anything. Other than the strange writing, there was nothing.

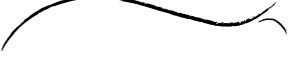
“How many more times you gonna look at that thing?” Tarc asked. He climbed onto his horse and turned toward home. “If we hurry, I might make it home for dinner.”

“You just ate!” Kief replied, stuffing his map in his satchel.

“That was just a morsel to hold me over.”

“I’ll give you a proper burial if you don’t make it.”

“You better hope I make it — you won’t stand a chance against Flinch in that urt championship if I don’t!”

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“Oh, I can take Flinch all right,” Kief replied, tightening his jaw.

Kief hated Flinch. Flinch was tough, and he knew it — and losing the championship to Flinch’s squad the year before was humiliating. This was Kief’s last chance for payback. He could hardly wait.



Kief was exhausted, and after long weeks of hard practice, he found himself looking forward to the weekends when he could return to the forest near the cave to search for the eagle. Sometimes Tarc would go with him and other times he’d go alone. When the snows began to fall, he went less frequently.

The week before the urt championship, he spotted the eagle again. He watched it a long while, gliding near the cliffs. It must have been riding on the air currents coming up from High Valley because it never flapped its wings. And then, he saw it dive. Like an arrow from a bow, it shot with such speed Kief didn’t think it could pull up in time. It disappeared into the snow-covered forest and when it swooped out again, it was carrying a white rabbit in its great talons. Kief watched in awe, his fist spontaneously shooting in the air as he cheered the eagle flying over his head.

Kief decided to swing by the school library to see if he could learn more about the eagle. He found a large leather-bound book on birds and raptors and situated himself in one of the big leather chairs near the fireplace. Nearly every page had a drawing of a different kind of bird. Some were simple ink sketches, others were detailed colored drawings.

“So many birds,” Kief mumbled.

About a quarter of the way through the book, he turned

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the page — a dark eagle stared him in the face. Kief stared back, nearly forgetting he was looking at a picture. Its feathers were as black as the dark sky with a bit of orange on the tips. A feathery crest came off the back of its head. It had golden yellow eyes that glared out over a black hooked beak. Knife-like claws were black as well.

Kief read, “Dark eagles are the rarest of the raptor class of birds. They prefer high altitudes and usually make their nests among the cliffs. They are mostly solitary creatures, although there have been a few unusual times when they have been seen gathering in large numbers, but the reasons are unknown.”

Kief looked into the crackling fire and tapped his finger on the page. The eyes of the eagle matched the gold of the flames.

He continued reading, “The bones of dark eagles are black, the only animals ever known to have them. Ancient legends held that they were placed on Fundautum to defend freedom; their black bones shielding them from evil.”

Kief closed the book. It was a fitting myth for such a bird. It was the most majestic animal Kief had ever seen.