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~ SAMPLE ~

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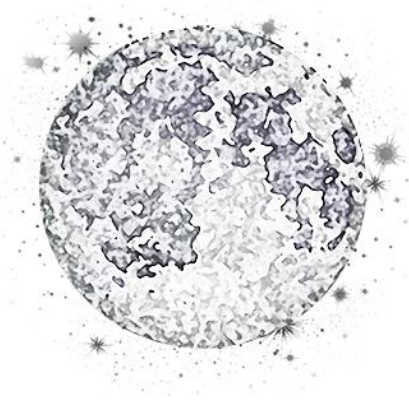
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CHAPTER 1



Sparks Fly

MAX BERGER awoke dripping with sweat on the cold brown linoleum floor beneath his cot in the adolescent boy's dormitory of Helpren Municipal Orphanage.

"Not again..." he moaned, stirring several roaches the size of almonds into scurrying away.

Tangled up in pythons made of damp, twisted blankets, Max felt as if he had been wrestling demons in his dreams, which, in a way, he had. Third night in a row, too, which was unusual, and each time, it got a little worse.

If this kept up, they'd be forced to use the jaws of life to extract his dead body from beneath this cot one morning. Sadly, they'd probably bury him in a bulk grave, and

nobody would ever remember that he existed or care that he was gone.

Limb by limb, Max untangled himself, crawled out from under the cot, and rose into the rectangle of moonlight shining through the dirty window at the end of the room. Five other teenage boys slept on rusty cots in a row along the wall, snoring and drooling onto stained gray pillows. Misspelled graffiti covered the wallboards, and brown water stains spread wide across the asbestos panel ceiling. The stench of urine, sweaty socks, and something sour, possibly a puddle of old puke, hung in the air.

A digital clock in a mesh cage on the wall flashed 11:45 in red dots. Almost midnight. Too rattled to go back to sleep, Max sat down on his cot slowly to avoid making it creak and ran his thin fingers through his thick brown hair, slicking it back with perspiration.

One of the windowpanes framed the moon neatly, slicing it into diamonds with the wire mesh embedded in the glass. Why was the moon always shining brightly when he dreamed of her? He smiled as images of her filled his mind—flowing blond hair, a spirit rippling with laughter, and sparkling sapphire eyes. Absolutely enchanting. With her at his side, holding his hand, he felt fully alive, happy. And whole. A rare feeling for him that, sadly, only ever happened in a nightmare.

It always started out wonderfully. He and the girl ran hand-in-hand over soft white sand at the edge of turquoise water on a perfect, blue-sky day. The crisp salty smell of fresh surf scented the air. Her hand felt warm in his; her laughter broke joyfully over the top of the cresting waves.

But then the air turned sour, smelling of dead things and decay. A blood-red moon replaced the sun, and they were dropped into crimson gloom. A cave gaped opened in the jagged cliffs along the sea's edge. Ancient, evil energy leached from its pitch-black

opening.

The girl's slender fingers slipped from his, and her eyes darkened to black pearls as she rose from the ground. Letting out a bloodcurdling scream, she was drawn backward through the moonlit air, hair trailing like a bloody swirling wake, and disappeared into the cave's shadows.

Max ran to her, desperate to help her, but when he reached the edge of the cave, the shadowy threshold came to life, clutching at him, blocking his way. He wrestled and wrestled, but it was as if he had fallen into a pit of black pythons, and he was quickly unable to move or even breathe.

And that's when he always awoke under his cot.

Max shook his head to cast off the funk of the dream. It seemed too vivid, too real to be just his imagination going wild, and it was always the same. He couldn't help wondering if the universe was sending him a hint about his future. Did the universe do that kind of thing? And if it did, what kind of future was it hinting at? One that ended in a nightmare, apparently.

That was fun.

"Oghnshnnn...no way, dude..." a kid nearby named Zippler muttered in his sleep, rolling over and filling the room with the chirp of rusty springs. Another boy wrestling demons of his own kind.

Max stood and stretched up to the ceiling, breaking a paper towel and electrical tape bandage on his thigh loose. He pressed it back in place, and his thumb came away bloody.

"Spaz, you idiot," he hissed.

During dinner, Ronald Spazinski, aka “Spaz,” had stuck a skewer into his thigh. Why? Because Spaz was holding a sharp stick, and well there was Max’s thigh, and well, that’s what Spaz did. No real reason for it. Spaz was six three and 250 pounds, so he did what he pleased. And, for some reason, it pleased him immensely to hurt Max.

Sighing, Max wiped the blood off with the tail of his orange Property of Helpren t-shirt. Like everyone else here, he’d used a black marker to cross out P R E N and added another L to make it read Property of Hell.

Movement outside the window caught his eye. Strange figures chased each other across the surface of the moon. One was big and had wings; the other smaller and glowing. “What the heck?” Max shook his head, thinking his mind must still be rattled from the nightmare.

Treading slowly and silently—waking sleeping idiots at Helpren could get you spat on or punched—he made his way to the window. Looking down from the fourth floor, the slums of Warwick spread out before him, basking in the silver glow of a full moon. A thousand rectangles topped with antennas, wires, and an occasional clothesline. Directly below was the cracked tarmac back lot of Helpren. A rack of rusty barbells and a basketball hoop dangling from a slanted backboard filled one corner; a chipped green dumpster filled the other. Tall chain link fencing ran around the perimeter.

Whatever he’d seen flying was gone, but the mystery of it had stirred up a desire to be out there, under the moon, standing atop that dumpster, tasting a tiny bit of adventure. He lifted the sash, stepped out onto the shaky old fire escape, and descended the metal stairs through the cold evening air, hating every ounce of noise they produced. Pain from his thigh raced up like a hot knife when he jumped down from the last platform,

but he ignored it and ambled toward the dumpster. A rank smell filled his nostrils with poison as he climbed on top.

Standing on the metal lid, Max took it all in, tingling with excitement from a forbidden excursion in the cool, damp evening air. The chaos of downtown Warwick a dozen blocks away—sirens, shouting, engines, horns—echoed around him. A white plastic shopping bag danced lonely swirls with a breeze in an alley. A black cat on top of an oil barrel licked gore from its paws. A big fat rat scurried along the curb.

Above it all hung a bright, shimmering full harvest moon, so big and round that Max felt he could reach out and touch it. Images of the girl filled his mind, accompanied by a splash of intrigue.

“Who are you?” he wondered aloud.

The clock tower in Post Office Square chimed the hour, making midnight official. As the twelve echoey peals waxed and waned, a wave of sadness washed over him.

It had been midnight a year ago when he lost his past.

And his future.

“I’m the boy the world left behind,” he said wistfully, “...and now I’m the boy standing on a dumpster.”

Who am I?

Or perhaps a better question was—who had I been before...

The accident.

It always came back to the stupid accident. A year ago, his life had been truncated when he was struck by a Maxi Taxi. Miraculously, he hadn’t been injured other than hitting his head, but that turned out to be worse than broken bones. The doctors at

Warwick Memorial had called it the most severe case of amnesia they had ever seen. Everything before the headlights rushing up was a void, and even weirder, nobody had come to visit or claim him—no parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, neighbors, or friends. No strange, beautiful girl with long flowing hair and a bloodcurdling scream.

Whoever he had been before, there was nobody from that life that cared about him. They'd made no attempt to find him, and after all this time, he'd given up on ever finding them.

It was just him now.

He glanced back at the six stories of cinder block that was Helpren—a giant tombstone with steel doors and only a few narrow windows. Mr. Braun, his frustrated case worker, had called it “a hole where they store unwanted kids.” Max remembered with sadness that there had been talk of a foster home—a chance to start over with a new family—but in the end, no one had wanted him. Too old. Too complicated. Too damaged. He was deemed “not adoptable” and assigned to Helpren.

His favorite nurse at Warwick Memorial—the one that had dubbed him Max Berger since he was hit by a Maxi Taxi and liked burgers—had called him a “little brown-eyed charmer.” Well, if that was true, it hadn't done him any good. He'd been tossed aside like an unwanted toy. How desperately he wished things had turned out differently. More than anything, he wanted to belong somewhere, have a home, feel safe. Loved.

Movement to his right startled him. Out of pure instinct, his fists shot up and he shouted the official greeting of Helpren into the cool night air. “I'll hurt you back!”

A mangy brown alley cat on a blue plastic milk crate stared at him with yellow eyes reflecting the moon. A fellow forsaken traveler in this sad, lonely world.

“I won’t hurt you,” Max said, dropping his fists, certain that other kids had tried.

The cat ran off anyway.

Turning his attention back to the moon, Max closed his eyes and let its glow seep through his lids. Slowly, its peace and warmth soaked into his core.

A fluttering shadow disrupted the moon’s steady glow. He opened his eyes, but nothing was there. Strange magic seemed to be rippling through the moonlit air tonight. Hesitantly, he closed his eyes again, and suddenly, the darkness behind his eyelids became absolute.

Nothingness.

A void.

His eyes felt glued shut as a presence filled the blackness, a presence as purely evil as the energy leaching from the cave in his dream. It swirled around him, and its icy tendrils brushed his skin. His lungs were unable to draw breath. A muffled voice arose in the distance, dark and evil, spewing inscrutable words. Hot panic sizzled through his nerves. Who was that? What was going on?

A flicker of light broke through, accompanied by the sound of metal on metal, and the voice silenced; the evil presence vanished. Drawing a deep breath, Max popped his eyes open and emerged into a waking nightmare. Above him, several hundred feet away, a battle raged between two floating creatures in front of the shimmering moon. They were too far to see clearly, but like he’d seen before, one had wings, and the other glowed; their weapons colliding sent out sprays of white, orange, and green sparks.

All his senses told him it was real, even if his mind refused to believe. What was happening before him made no sense. He pressed his thumb hard against the bandage

on his thigh, but the pain didn't change anything.

The battle moved closer as he watched with his heart beating so heavily that he could feel it in his ears. Part of him wanted to run, but his curiosity kept him glued in place. Swords clashing with great force filled the night with fireworks.

Only a hundred feet away now, Max could see the two combatants were a strange lizard-like creature, sort of an alligator with long, muscular arms and wings, and a girl. A beautiful girl with long flowing hair and dazzling sapphire eyes. She wore a flowing dress and glowed like moonlight.

Max felt his blood drain out through his feet.

It was the girl from his dream.

Growling, the lizard struck out with a powerful blow, bringing his sword straight down toward her head. Max winced, but the girl brought her sword up just in time and blocked the attack. She struck back, but her thrust was weak. The lizard dodged it easily and almost skewered her with a responding jab.

She looked too tired to defend herself for much longer, and her combatant showed no signs of fatigue. If the battle continued as it was, she was a goner. The lizard swiped at her again. She barely managed to dodge it, but the tip of the blade cut through a cord around her waist and sent a small satchel plummeting.

Max leaned out to catch it, nearly falling off the dumpster, and snagged an errant string. Pulling the rescued object to him, he stared down at his hand. A pouch made of strange material, silk woven from strands of light, with something small and round inside, rested in his palm.

He looked up to find her staring at him holding it, fear in her eyes.

The lizard swung hard, aiming at her neck; Max's heart skipped a beat as the blade almost severed her head. He had to help her, but how? Fifty feet of night air stood between them. Searching around him for something to use, he spotted an empty pickle jar resting against the back hinge of the dumpster. He fetched it and threw it at the lizard as hard as he could. It soared through the air, struck the creature's head, and bounced off. The beast whirled and glared at him with angry red eyes. Max gulped, fearing he'd just done a very stupid thing.

The girl took advantage of her opponent's momentary distraction. In a motion that spanned barely a fraction of a second, she spun in a graceful arc, like a dolphin flipping in the water, and brought her sword around hard, right through its skull. The creature disintegrated into a sack of matcha powder sliced wide open with a chainsaw.

Max recoiled and covered his eyes. A moment later, when he peeked through the gaps in his fingers, the girl floated toward him through a swirling green cloud. Her eyes were as he had seen in his dream, only set into a face that was perfectly white, not deathly white, but pristine—sapphires on snow.

CHAPTER 2



Moon Spirit

MAX had never been so aware of his heartbeat before. It loomed to fill the space between him and the approaching girl. She moved as if supported by a silver cord tethered to the moon. Behind her, long silvery robes billowed gently, leaving a wake of tiny sparkles.

Beauty floating.

Max couldn't take his eyes off her but worried he should be running—her glowing sword was still drawn.

She lowered herself atop the dumpster, though her feet didn't make contact, and regarded him silently.

"I, um," Max fumbled with his words while reaching out to offer her the satchel. He found it hard to believe he was standing in front of the girl from his dreams, and she was

made of moonbeams. “Here.”

Looking slightly surprised, she accepted it. “Thanks, I think. You saved me, but perhaps you didn’t mean to...” Her voice was melodic but pulsing with distress, and her crisp features danced playfully when she spoke.

Max relaxed a little. “Why else would I have thrown that jar?”

“It’s just that I saw you there while I was fighting, holding my satchel, looking scared, and then instead of running, which would have been a perfectly understandable thing for a human to do, you threw something and struck the veptor. Only I wondered maybe if you threw it at me instead and missed. If so, I’ll be on my way.”

“No!” Max found her bashfulness adorable. “Why would I throw something at you?”

“Well,” she said, hooking her hair behind her ears with slender fingers. “You are a human.” She looked down; her hair escaped and fell across her face. “And I mean no offense, but generally, humans are awful.”

Max laughed and jumped off the dumpster, ignoring the pain in his thigh; he spun to look up at her. “No offense taken. You are right—most humans are awful, especially around here. But not me.”

“No,” she floated down to meet him, smiling softly. “Not you, it seems. Other humans who have seen me usually run screaming. I frighten them, but I don’t know why.”

“Well, the sword probably doesn’t help.”

She flashed a charming grimace. “Right, there is that.” With a flick of her wrist, the sword slurped back into the sleeve of her gown. “I don’t usually have that out, though, honest.” Her eyes widened and her brow furrowed. “Oh, I promise you that I am much

nicer than what you are seeing tonight, really I am.”

“So, it’s not every night you do black flips and drive a sword through the skull of a giant flying alligator?”

Her face sank, and shimmering tears flowed down her cheeks. “No, please! That’s not what I am, honestly. Tonight is the strangest night of my life. I’m in big trouble, and I fear I’ll be alone and fighting and hiding for all eternity now.” She was so upset at this point that her words came out in chunks between sobs. “...and...I...don’t...want...that!”

“Hey, hey.” Max moved a little closer, wondering if he should hold her hand like in the dream, but thinking that unwise. “It’ll be okay. Really. I didn’t mean to upset you. Maybe if you talk to me about what’s going on, you’ll feel better. I’m a good listener.” She sniffed and looked at him skeptically while he continued. “You can start by telling me a little about yourself, okay? Nice and easy. Here, I’ll start. My name is Max.”

To his delight, his rambling worked, and her last few whimpers trailed off. She wiped the drops of liquid light from her cheeks and looked up at him, her face adorably puffy from crying. “My name is Sarina.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

Sarina’s face fell, and she looked ready to cry again but composed herself. “Thanks, but it’s not my real name. I don’t know my real name. None of us do. We don’t even know who we are—*what* we are. We call ourselves moon spirits because the moon’s light gives us energy.”

They both startled as a police helicopter flying over Warwick chopped the air into little chunks of sound and flashed red and blue urgency across the skyscrapers. Sarina’s eyes followed it as it headed toward the harbor before turning back, her face awash with

fear. "I best be going. It's not safe for me here."

Max sensed that she was not afraid of the police but of something more haunting from her world. "What sort of trouble are you in that has you so scared?"

She sighed and leaned in conspiratorially, whispering, "I stole something very important." She glanced around, fear knitting her brow. "There are other moon spirits, bad moon spirits, who want it back. That veptor I killed is one of their soldiers, and there are more like that. They will search for me until they find me, kill me, and get back what I took."

"Well, what if you return it?" Max asked. "Problem solved."

"No!" Passion flared in her eyes. "I can't do that! You have no idea how disastrous that would be."

"What is it?" Max's curiosity was getting the better of him. "Can I see it?"

Sarina drew back and cocked her head, studying him. "I suppose I owe you at least that for helping me." She opened the pouch and reached in. Her hand came out clasped as if holding a moth she didn't want to crush. She paused and looked up at him with her big blue eyes. "If you try anything sneaky, remember that I can fly, and I have a sword."

"Both things that are a little hard to forget."

Frowning, she stretched her cupped hand toward Max and opened her fingers. In her palm was a small, unremarkable little white ball.

"That's it?" Max asked. "It looks like a gumball."

"What's a gumball?"

"Candy."

"What's candy?"

“A sweet thing that humans eat.”

“Like an owl?”

“Not at all.” Max realized he’d strayed into a topic he didn’t want to continue, although how an owl had been incorporated into that exchange had him mystified. “Never mind,” he brushed the comment away. “It’s so small and doesn’t look very special.”

Sarina shook her head slowly. “It may not look like much, but it is quite possibly the most dangerous and powerful object in existence.” A shadow passed over her eyes, and she dropped her voice once more. “*She* is desperate for it, and Garook is determined to get it for her.”

“Who is *she*? And who is Garook?”

“Garook is a powerful moon spirit, a very nasty one. *She* has no name, but she is monstrous and evil. That’s why I stole it. And I must never allow her to get it.”

“Is *she* a human?”

“I have never met her, but she is certainly not human. She is from the world of spirits, evil spirits, and she has been like a shadow to me all my life. I have felt her, waiting, watching, poised to awaken when the time was right.” Sarina looked up at Max and cocked her head; a lock of hair dropped to cover one of her blue eyes. “Tell me, Max, have you ever encountered pure evil?”

Max remembered the strange presence he felt just before he had opened his eyes and seen her fighting in the sky, but he didn’t know if that had even been real. Perhaps he had fallen asleep for a second? “I’m not really sure.”

Sarina’s eyes widened. “Believe me, you’d know if you had. You see, there are many

forces in this world, many energies and magical currents that move around us at all times without our knowing it. But she is different.” Sarina’s eyes darkened. “She is pure evil energy, as black as the inside of a sealed cave. Water turns putrid when she travels past it. Living creatures are sickened by her slightest touch. The very air turns poison in every direction she looks.”

“Ouch.” Max’s stomach tightened. “I can see why you ran to avoid her. I’d have run too.”

“I did not run to save myself, Max!” Sarina leaned forward, her nose inches from Max’s, her eyes boiling with distress. “I ran to save you. To save the world. I felt deep inside that she was coming, so I stole it and fled, and now everything is a horrible mess. But she would wreak havoc on the world if she obtained the Orb, so I could not have let her have it, now could I?” Her finger jabbed the air separating them. “Could I? Well? Could I?”

“No, no. I suppose not.” Max backed up a step, surprised by her passion. “But what will you do with it? Where will you go?”

Sarina closed her fingers around the Orb and flashed a worried look at Max. “The truth is that I do not know where to take it, and I must be careful. Garook is clever and there are shadow spirits to worry about too. They would steal it if they could. Horribly sneaky creatures—devious and evil. They could be anywhere.”

She stopped speaking and ran her gaze over the shadows nearby. Max felt the darkness crowding in and imagined inky black splotches oozing around with tiny, beady eyes.

“There is only one hope,” she said, turning back and sighing. “I must consult with an old witch named Kalahandra I met a long time ago. She is very wise and knows many

things. I hope she can help me understand what must be done.” She paused and bit her lip. “But, there is a problem...”

“What problem?”

“Well,” she hesitated, looking like she wished she didn’t have to say what she was about to say. “I do not know where she is. I think I can find her, but it will not be easy. I may have to travel far, and I must remain partially solid to carry the Orb, which makes me vulnerable and slow. I will be in great danger, and so will the Orb, but I have no choice. I must find her! She is my only hope.” Silver tears formed on the edges of her eyes. “If only...” Her voice trailed off as if she were unwilling to finish her thought.

“If only what?”

Sniffing, Sarina wiped the tears away and studied Max as if searching for something in his eyes. She looked down at the ground and drew a glowing circle on the tarmac with her toe. “It’s just that I can’t leave the Orb unattended. It’s too precious for that, so I must carry it.” She lifted her head and met his eyes again. “But...if only there were someone who could watch it for me, someone brave and trustworthy, while I search for Kalahandra, then...”

Max blinked three times as what she was proposing sank in. He gulped. “Me?”

Sarina crossed her arms over her chest and flashed a thin, hesitant smile. “I know it might seem crazy asking a human to watch the Orb, but that’s what Garook would think too. He’d never expect me to have done such a thing. Desperate times call for desperate measures. I must find Kalahandra. The fate of the world depends on it.”

“I’d certainly like to help you,” Max said, his pulse starting to race at the idea of babysitting the most dangerous and powerful object in existence, “but I’m not so sure

that's a good idea. I know nothing about your world or magic orbs.”

“There's nothing to know.” Sarina's face softened, and she shook her head gently.

“You'd just keep it safely hidden away for me. That's all. Garook would never think of searching the world of humans for it. I'll bet it would never even awaken for you, so it would be hard for him to track.”

“He can track it?”

“Well, not easily. I think you'd be safe for a moon or two.”

Max sighed, starting to feel pressed into agreeing. “So, that would give you enough time to find Kalahandra and make a plan?”

“Yes, it would. Without the Orb, I can travel safely and swiftly.” Her eyebrows rose in clean, pleading arcs. “Oh, Max—I'd never ask this of you if I saw another way, but failure is absolute in this case. I need help, and I can tell you are trustworthy. I can see it in your eyes. Will you do this for me? Please?”

Max chewed on it for a moment. While it seemed like a dangerous, crazy idea, he had nowhere to go and nothing to do. Helping her by babysitting the Orb would give him a mission in life. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to calm the ball of anxiety burning in his stomach. “I will.”

Sarina's face brightened, and her eyes sparkled with tears of joy. “Oh, Max! You've restored my hope that this may all work out somehow! Don't worry, I won't leave you with the Orb for long. I promise. I'll come back here on the first night of the next full moon so you can return it. I don't want to risk being away any longer. Garook is dangerous and powerful. If he were to find you somehow, he would descend with an army of veptors and kill anyone who got in his way.”

“Garook doesn’t scare me,” Max said, trying to sound brave while ignoring the fear twisting inside.

“He should.” Sarina arched an eyebrow. “Are you certain you are okay with the risk?”

Max looked at the ground. “I am, and watching the Orb would mean I’d get to see you again, which would be, well, really, really nice. You are the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met.” Surprised that he had just spoken those words, Max briefly looked up and was happy to see a slight pink blush wash over her white cheeks.

“Yes, I’d like that too.” Her eyes softened. “I really would. It’ll give me something to look forward to.”

“Just to make the plan official...” Max reached out, curious to finding out if her hand felt as it did in his dream. “Let’s shake on it?”

Sarina looked at his outstretched hand and ignored it as she leaned in a little closer. “I’d like to try a different human custom.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. Her lips were warm smoke on his skin. Intoxicating. But then a shock ran through Max’s body as if he’d touched a high-voltage wire. They pulled apart.

“Sorry!” Sarina’s eyes were wide with fear and confusion. “Is that what usually happens? I’ve never done that before. I’ve just seen humans do it and thought it looked nice.”

Max touched his cheek. “I don’t know. I’ve never been kissed by a moon spirit girl before. It was nice, though, at first, very nice.”

“Yes. Very nice, at first.” Sarina turned a lock of her hair over and over. “You know, I can’t shake the feeling that I know you, more than just tonight, I mean. It’s strange.”

Max resisted the urge to tell her about his dream, worried it might scare her. “Yeah, I feel that too. Strange.”

Sarina looked up at the moon. It had fallen a few inches toward the skyline since Max had come out through the window. Shimmering replicas glowed in triplicate on the mirrored windows of skyscrapers.

“As much as I’d like to stay longer,” Sarina said, “I think I’d best be going now. I’ve probably stayed in one place too long as it is.”

“I guess so,” Max said, wishing he could think of some way to keep her a little longer.

Sarina held the Orb out. “It’s warm, so I think it likes our plan. Oh, one thing I almost forgot. If it ever glows green, then you know danger is near. You probably should run when that happens.”

“Run?”

“Well, you can’t fly.”

“Right. Run.”

“Do you have a sword?”

“Will a plastic knife do?”

“What’s a plastic knife?”

“Never mind.” Max turned his palm up. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me or the Orb. No one will ever find out I have it.”

Sarina held her hand above his palm and lowered it ceremoniously. The Orb and the tips of her fingers made gentle contact with his skin. Another bolt of energy shot through Max’s body. He gasped. The feeling wasn’t unpleasant, but powerful. Incredibly powerful.

Sarina's eyes widened as her fingers drew back from the Orb resting on Max's palm, and she rose into the air. "I will leave you with it now. Thanks to you, I can travel safely." She lifted higher and grew thin, becoming a wisp of smoke in the shape of a girl. "First night of the next full moon, right here."

"I'll be here. I promise."

With a little wave, she floated off toward the moon. Sadness washed over Max as he watched her move over the city, leaving him alone again on the cracked tarmac behind Helpren. When she was no longer visible, he sighed and studied the Orb in his hand. It started glowing, and fear raced up his spine—she had said it would never awaken for him! He stared at it in awe. There was something special about its radiance; it was more than just light. Intelligent. Magical. And mischievous. Was it crazy that he had agreed to babysit this mysterious, dangerous little gumball?

"Be nice to the babysitter, okay?"

The Orb pulsed.

Max's heart jumped. Feeling a little spooked, he ran toward Helpren, happy to find the large steel door at the back propped open with a soda bottle. The Orb, resting in his upturned palm, lit the way as he scuttled down the back hallway. He rounded a corner and stopped short when it began glowing sickly green.

"Uh oh."

His pulse racing, he took off toward the stairwell, hoping to get back to his room and under the covers before something evil from Sarina's world rose up from the ground or lurched out of a shadow. As he rounded the corner, he realized he should have gone the other way.

The danger had been something evil from his world. A massive gorilla wearing an orange t-shirt blocked the stairs. Ronald Spazinsky. A wry smile crept across lips set into a peculiarly flat face, like a clay bust dropped face down on the floor while still soft, leaving only tiny cracks for eyes. An unlit cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth.

Max closed his fingers around the orb, but not soon enough.

Spaz palmed Max's skull like a basketball. "What'cha got, dork?"

CHAPTER 3



Light Magic, Dark Magic

PINNED in place by Spaz's beefy paw, Max closed his fingers tightly around the Orb and held it as far away as he could. The odds that he'd keep Spaz from taking it were pretty much zero, but even if it meant getting clobbered, he wasn't going to give it up without a fight.

With the glowing Orb now hidden, the stairwell was nearly pitch black except for a dim flashing red and green glow from a neon Pizza sign nearby.

Spaz's face flickered in and out of view, on then off, red, then green, red, then green, but always terrifying. "Give it, Berger."

"You can't have this, Spaz."

Spaz's expression twisted into a deranged toddler deprived of a toy. "You tellin' me what I can't have, dork?"

Max realized his mistake. "No, no," he quickly backtracked. "What I meant was that

you don't want this. It's dirty, covered in trash. I found it in the dumpster. It's just a stupid gumball, anyway."

Spaz spun Max around and twisted him into a stranglehold, compressing his throat so he could barely breathe. "Gum don't glow, moron." Spaz's breath reeked of cigarettes. The sweat on the front of his shirt felt warm and sticky against Max's back. "You found a diamond or something. Give it, or I'll break your bones and toss you in the dumpster!"

"Diamonds don't glow either, Spaz," Max managed to gasp out.

A second later, Max was skidding across the dirty linoleum floor, thrown like a stuffed toy. He crashed into the wall but managed to keep his grip on the Orb. "It's just a kid's toy covered with baby drool. You really don't want it, trust me!"

Spaz approached, clenching his fists. "I'm gonna beat you to a pulp and then take that glowy thingy, Berger."

Max knew if he didn't think of something fast, Spaz would pound him until he was unconscious and take the Orb. No other option coming to mind, he popped the Orb into his mouth and swallowed hard. It hurt as it went down his throat, but the sensation stopped, and that was that—the Orb was safely inside.

"You ate it?" Spaz howled. "You, loser! I'm going to pound you 'til you puke it up."

Spaz rushed at Max and thrust his big black boot forward. Max flipped on his side in time to avoid getting his ribs cracked by the impact, but he got the wind knocked out of him when Spaz's foot sank into his solar plexus. Desperate to put enough distance between him and Spaz to get to his feet, Max rolled away. He had barely gotten up to his knees before Spaz caught up to him and pulled his foot back.

Max felt like he was about to throw up. His stomach clenched, but he didn't vomit. What came out was a blast of light as if he had burped up a tiny sun. It flared so intensely that Spaz reeled back, shielding his eyes. The fire alarm went off, filling the air with electronic distress. A hundred streams of water sprayed in every direction as the sprinklers answered the call.

"I can't see!" Spaz shouted, water raining down on him like a cloudburst. "My eyes! You jerk! My eyes!"

Max had no idea what had just happened, but he knew he had to leave before the other kids and Snefler arrived. He forced his body to stand and bounded for the stairs, taking them three at a time. Ignoring the pain in his head, legs, and stomach, he turned on the first floor as bleary-eyed kids in boxer shorts emerged from their rooms.

"Wha's going on, Berger?" a kid with pierced eyebrows asked as Max ran past.

"Malfunction."

"Wha'd you call me?"

Max groaned. Vocabulary was forever a problem around here. "It means the alarm is broken."

"Well, nex' time jus' say it, loser."

Max ignored him and ran to the end of the corridor, where he rounded a corner and entered the maintenance section. Going back to his room was out of the question. Spaz would come for him there, looking for revenge.

At the end of the hallway, Max checked to see that no one was looking before opening a door labeled Boiler Room. Slipping in quickly, he closed the door behind him. It stank of grease and mildew, and the noise of the pumps and fans was deafening.

That's why nobody else ever came here. It was a perfect hiding spot. Working his way deep into the room, he came to a nook where he had set up a makeshift bed, his little hideout for when he needed to disappear for a while.

His heart still pounding and his breath quick, he lowered himself onto the blanket, finding little comfort on the hard cement beneath. In the soft glow around him, he could see the trunk of pipes above, banded together with big steel straps and suspended by bolts the size of his arms.

Wait.

A soft glow?

There were no lights in here.

Max lifted his hand above his head and gasped. His skin radiated silvery incandescence as if he were a human nightlight.

His mind went blank for a second, unable to process that his skin was glowing. What did that mean? Had the stupid thing dissolved and spread throughout his body? Had he destroyed the most dangerous and powerful object in existence by swallowing it?

Sarina might be a little upset about that.

This was all so strange. Before tonight, he'd never have believed that magic was real. Now he had magic inside of him. And he'd met the girl from his dream. And she had been made of moonbeams. How was that even possible? He rolled over on his side, looking at his glowing hand.

One month.

That seemed an eternity at Helpren, but now, at least, he had a sense of purpose, and seeing Sarina again was something to look forward to.

Little sparkles trailed his hand as he swayed it back and forth. The light strengthened, and a bright spot formed in the center of his palm. He brought it closer to his face, and the little circle crystalized into the form of a ball within his body, just below the skin; the Orb shining peacefully inside of him. It hadn't dissolved!

"What are you?" he asked.

Instantly, the Orb went dark, casting everything into deep blackness. Max's breath caught in his throat, and he became aware of a presence there with him. Not an evil presence like before, but not a friendly one either. Ancient and powerful.

Fearing the impact of anything he might say or do, he remained still and quiet.

Words coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time arose as if emanating from inside his mind.

Let me tell you a story.

And then the Orb told him a tale, but not with spoken words—a movie playing directly in his brain.



A THOUSAND years ago, the Orb scratched a white line across a starry black sky above the thatched roofs of a small colony of humans. As it approached the smallest hut at the edge, it turned like a guided missile spotting its target, and flew right through baby Alimona's open bedroom window. She reached for it, and with a gentle thud, the Orb's trip ended in a fleshy palm smelling of milk and cheese. Alimona blew a bubble and popped the small glowing ball into her mouth.

Across the room, Herzel, her mother, sat grinding corn and humming a song. When

she saw her daughter swallowing a strange object, she jumped up, spilling the corn.

“Alimona! Spit that out!”

Alimona smiled, puffing her pink cheeks but keeping her lips closed. Herzel raced to her child, who clasped her hands over her mouth and giggled through chubby fingers. Herzel pulled her daughter’s hands away from her mouth and thumped her back firmly. The Orb popped out into her hand, and she gasped as she beheld the strange, glowing ball she had freed from her daughter’s mouth.

She knew that nothing good came uninvited through the window in the middle of the night.

Alimona reached for it, but Herzel carried it away. With trembling hands, she buried it deep in a woven basket filled with soft furs. Alimona cried until she finally fell asleep after the moon slipped below the horizon. Herzel lay awake all night, cradling her daughter while gazing at the stars, fearful of what morning might bring.

When the new day began, Herzel swaddled Alimona and placed her in a large basket with a strong handle. She slipped the ball into a pouch at her side and headed out into the village. Storm clouds boiled above as Herzel trudged down dirt roads, feeling as dark inside as the night of a new moon. She passed houses made of wattles coated in clay with smoke twisting from crooked chimneys. Villagers bustled about, greeting her enthusiastically. She dropped her eyes and said nothing as she marched past. In such a small village, her silence was louder than a scream. By the time she arrived at the entrance to the temple, the villagers were stacked ten deep behind her.

Herzel looked up at the gods carved into the pillars framing the entrance and prayed for Alimona’s protection.

Sandalwood-scented air floated out of the temple, and Kaktup, a bald bear-sized man, emerged. With thick arms adorned in skull tattoos, he struck a large gong and then stepped over to stand in front of Herzel. He did not speak, nor did he smile. His features were as still and harsh as the chiseled stone faces of the gods behind him.

Herzel lifted a sleeping Alimona from the basket with shaking hands, kissed her on the forehead, and placed her on the ground at Kaktup's feet. She took the strange object out of the small pouch and rested it on Alimona's stomach, where it began to glow.

Bowing and not daring to look up at Kaktup, she stepped back. Kaktup picked up the ball and held it up to the sky, inspecting it like a fine jewel. He closed his fingers around it and brought it close to his chest. His eyes popped wide, and he smiled ever so slightly.

Without a word to Herzel or the villagers watching in awed silence, he picked up Alimona, who awoke and cried, reaching out tiny hands for her mother. Holding her under his arm, Kaktup silently marched back into the temple, striking the gong once more on his way in. Alimona's cry faded into the shadows, and the villagers rushed to comfort Herzel as she collapsed and wailed.

Baby Alimona was gone.

The priests had claimed her. And the Orb.

The scene faded. Max's heart ached for Herzel and baby Alimona, wondering what had become of them, but the vision wasn't over yet. A series of images flashed across his mind like a fleeting prophecy. An island with a grand pyramid glowing in the light of a full moon. A procession of hundreds of chanting moon worshipers dressed in deep-hooded black and white robes glistening with silver emblems depicting lunar phases. Blood spilling onto the ground from a white marble altar. The interior of a dark temple

where a woman with black eyes, ashen skin, and hair writhing like snakes sat on a throne, making something with her hands while muttering evil-sounding incantations.

He seemed to fly toward her, and when he drew close, her head shot up, meeting his gaze directly. Max gasped. She spat words at him in a deep voice full of venom.

I have been waiting.

You cannot save them.

I will kill them all!

The hairs on Max's neck prickled with fear as the image faded, replaced by the pipes and bolts above, once again illuminated by the glow emanating from his skin.

“Whoa.”

If that was the *she* Sarina was running from, he understood her fear. The woman had been terrifying, and she had been looking squarely at him when she spoke.

Did she know he had the Orb?

Trembling, Max curled up into a ball on his side, unable to get those burning, evil eyes and the sound of her venomous voice out of his mind. *I will kill them all!* Regrets started creeping in. A full month of having the Orb inside of him now seemed like a very long time. Maybe agreeing to babysit it for Sarina had been a terrible idea? Her world was terrifying, and he knew nothing about it.

After laying there for a long time, recalling every detail about Sarina and trying to not think about *her*, sleep finally came, but it had to sneak up on him and pounce.

CHAPTER 4



New Friends & Enemies

SARINA, exhausted from traveling over cold, lonely water all night, finally reached land and came upon a small harbor town with glowing windows and cobblestone streets. Dozens of boats crowded the harbor, their masts rocking back and forth from the tumble of the sea. Clanging buoys with flashing red lights argued with one another while a soft breeze flapped the flags atop tall poles on the pier. Sarina made a game of darting amongst the masts, moving swiftly enough that the few humans milling about saw nothing more than a flash of light.

North of the harbor, the sea cut into the land to form a small lagoon surrounded by tall cliffs. Resting on rocks jutting far into the sea, abandoned and forlorn, sat a little stone lighthouse. Sarina dropped down and landed on the roof. A small broken fishing boat rested against the rocks on the far side. A rock had pierced its hull, and a pair of

orange gloves floated in the water nearby.

Sarina couldn't help wondering what made humans travel across the open sea in such fragile vessels. Why didn't they stay on the land where they were safe? After all, humans sink. She knew because she saw one die on the frozen lake near her mountain home one night. The ice broke, he fell through, splashed a bit, and then dropped out of sight. She went down later and saw him sitting on the bottom, eyes wide open but not seeing, little bubbles clinging to his blue flesh, lips pale and parted. It haunted her for weeks.

As she looked at the little broken boat, it occurred to her that many humans must lie at the bottom of the sea. She pitied them. All of them. Life as a human was so precarious, so fleeting. All it took was falling into the water.

Why did Max have to be a human?

What a wonderful moon spirit friend he'd make! They would fly through the night sky, take turns scaring humans, and dance with the bats. A warm feeling spread through her heart as she thought about him, and a blush of embarrassment warmed her cheeks as she remembered that she had kissed him.

Why did he feel so familiar...too familiar?

What had come over her?

It had felt nice at first, for sure, but why had there been a shock when they made contact? She'd never felt anything like that, and she'd touched a human before. Many moons ago, she'd flown into a window where a woman slept and placed a hand on her forehead to see what a human felt like. There was no shock when she made contact, just softness and warmth, although it was unpleasant when the woman woke up and started screaming.

Feeling tired, worried about the future, and slightly disgusted by the thought of thousands of human corpses on the ocean floor, Sarina stood on the lighthouse roof and watched the water explode against the cliffs. This would be the perfect place to rest and gather strength. The night was nearly over. She could play in the moonlit sea spray along the cliffs for a bit to lift her spirits and sleep inside during the day to stay clear of the sun's rays. At night, she'd resume her search for Kalahandra, and once she found her and knew what to do with the Orb, she'd head back to meet Max.

Everything would work out just fine.

As long as Garook didn't find her.

Or Max.



JEXTER had followed Sarina ever since seeing her emerge from the top of a building in the human city. Why were Garook and his veptors out hunting for her? Something big was going on, something that might be of great interest to his kind, and he was determined to find out what.

Traveling silently below her, he'd trailed her like the shadow of a shark in the water. When she arrived at the tiny lighthouse, he took refuge in an adjacent shed, tucking himself neatly into a corner behind a shovel and a rake.

Now, he just had to wait and watch. Shadow spirits excelled at that. Their patience was tireless. They could remain secreted within a small shadow for months or even years if necessary. He'd stay close to her, and when the time was right, he would emerge like a

spider and consume whatever opportunity had fallen into his web. Experience had taught him that patience always yielded results. It was just a matter of waiting and watching. Waiting and watching.



MAX awoke with a terrible start as a metallic *Bang! Bang! Bang!* ripped through the air. A shaft of bright daylight flooded in through a high casement window across the boiler room. What time was it? How long had he been asleep?

Bang! Bang! Bang!

What was that sound? He dragged his aching body to a standing position and made his way through the maze of pipes toward it. His mind was reeling. The fact that he had awakened here meant that the events of last night were real. He'd met Sarina. He'd swallowed the Orb. He'd nearly blinded Spaz. He'd seen *her* in a prophecy starting at him with evil black eyes.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He looked at his hand, and the tip of his finger pulsed gently, letting him know the Orb was still safely inside. It was hard to believe that magic was real with the sun shining. Magic and daylight went together like marshmallows and mustard.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Stepping between a pair of thick air ducts, he came face to face with Phil, the janitor. Bald, wrinkled, and kind. He was working on fixing a valve or something with a large hammer. He looked up at Max with eyebrows high, wrinkling his forehead into a

washboard.

“You sleep in here, kid?” he asked, the large hammer in his hand paused mid-air.

“Yes, sir.”

Phil smiled. “Sir! You the only one ever called me that!”

“I’ll bet I am, sir,” Max said, heading toward the door. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Lunchtime. Hey—is your name Berger? Snefler’s been calling that name all morning. Makes sense he can’t find you ‘cause you been in here.”

Max froze. “Calling my name?”

“Announcements, every fifteen minutes or so. Something about a visitor. Best go find out.”

“A visitor?” Max repeated. “Thanks, I will.”

“Ya better run. ‘twas a while ago. Might have left.”

“Yes, sir.”

Phil smiled and swung his hammer. *Bang!*

Max left the boiler room, unable to imagine what visitor he might have. It was too soon for his case worker, Mr. Braun, to be back, and nobody else knew he even existed. He raced down the long corridor but stopped at the double door leading into the dining room. The roar of fifty kids eating lunch echoed off the walls. The salty, tangy smell of greasy macaroni and cheese and garlic bread wafted toward him, making his stomach grumble. He’d missed breakfast, and now he would miss lunch, too.

Hunkering down, he crept along, not wanting to be seen through the little windows at the top of the doors. By now, everyone at Helpren knew that Spaz was looking for

him. Rushing down a hallway to the right, he arrived at a wooden door with a frosted glass window. 'Headmaster' was painted on it in faded gold letters. Snefler's office. Max stood outside for a few seconds to catch his breath and then knocked on the glass.

"Come in!" a rusty voice called out.

Max turned the chipped handle and opened the door, fearing what awaited him on the other side. Snefler sat in a big wingback chair behind his desk. He glared at Max through wrinkles folding in on his mean little, bloodshot eyes. A single curl of hair springing from his bald head sat on his forehead like a dead worm.

Hand still on the doorknob, Max remained on the threshold, afraid to go in any farther. "You were looking for me, sir?"

The door swung wide, and Max jumped back. Mr. Braun stood to one side, filling a corner of the room with his gigantic form. If ever there was a welcome sight! Mr. Braun was an ex-boxer turned social services worker, and his broad, kindhearted face was vexed. "Where have you been, Max?"

"You missed roll call this morning, Berger!" Snefler yelled. "That's toilet duty for a month!"

Max stepped inside, trying to think fast. "Those fire alarms last night were so loud, they made me nauseous. I spent the night in the oversized stall on the third floor, puking. I guess I fell asleep because I woke up there just a few minutes ago."

Snefler shot up out of his chair, tall and lanky, wearing a rumpled suit and untucked shirt. "That's a lie, Berger! I checked all the stalls myself this morning. You're lying, and it'll cost you dearly when I discover the truth!"

"Back off, Snefler!" Mr. Braun barked, stepping into the middle of the space between

Snefler and Max.

“I will not! Nor will I tolerate being lied to by one of my boys!”

Mr. Braun slammed his meatloaf-sized fist onto Snefler’s desk, sending three pencils flying. “He’s not one of your boys anymore!”

Confusion fluttered through Max’s mind. “What?”

Snefler sat down hard in his chair and spun angrily away.

Mr. Braun turned, giving Max his full attention. “It’s your lucky day, Max. How fast can you be ready to go?”

“Go?” Max felt tingly all over.

“This is a huge mistake!” Snefler shouted over his shoulder.

“It’s not your decision, Snefler,” Mr. Braun said. “Yes, Max. Go! The universe dealt you a luck card. Out of the blue, I received complete, signed transfer papers for you, effective immediately. You’re moving in with a foster family.”

“Really?” Max’s heart did a little dance.

“Go get your stuff.” Mr. Braun smiled. “We’ll leave as soon as you are ready.”

Max’s whole body rippled with joy. This felt almost too good to be true, but the excitement waned when a worry swooped in. How would he return the Orb? He dropped hard onto a chair against the wall. “Is it far away?”

Mr. Braun smiled. “It’s plenty far away from here, way out of town in the suburbs.”

Snefler swung around and leaned on his desk, smiling wickedly. “I looked this family up, Braun. They’re as strict as they come. They just kicked a boy out for breaking their rules. What makes you think a lying, rule-breaking, troublemaker like Berger will last a day there? So, if he doesn’t want to go, then perhaps it’s best if he stays.”

“Not want to go? Of course, he wants to go! Right, Max?”

“Yes, of course...” Max trailed off, trying to quiet the part of him that was freaking out about possibly not being able to get back for the meeting with Sarina. As strict as they come? That was going to make it hard to sneak back here. If only he hadn’t agreed to babysit the Orb for her! It had seemed like the right idea at the time, but things were different now. There was the lucky break he’d been hoping for. It was almost like the universe was playing games with him. Was this destined to turn into a nightmare somehow?

“Max,” Mr. Braun urged, “I don’t know what’s cookin’ in the oven atop your head, but this is a real good home we’re talking about. I know these people. You’ll be happy there.”

“Is there any chance I could defer for a month?” Max hated having to ask that question. He didn’t want to stay here another minute if he didn’t have to, let alone a month.

“No, Max. That’s not possible, and if you don’t stop fooling around right now, I’ll call this whole thing off. So, what’s it going to be? Stay or go?”

Max’s heart sent an answer up and out of his mouth, casting aside any worries about what it would mean. “Go, of course.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mr. Braun said, pumping his fist. “Now, go get your stuff, and you’ll never have to see this place again.”

Max gulped.

If only that were true.

CHAPTER 5



Beginnings and Endings

MAX left Snefler's office and raced through the building as fast as he could go. He decided to push aside worries about finding a way to get back and meet Sarina. He'd figure something out when the time came. For now, he wanted to enjoy the fact that he was leaving Helpren to go live with a family. Nothing else mattered. It was a dream come true.

Luckily, he didn't run into any kids in the corridors. It was Saturday, so the entire population of Helpren was still in the cafeteria. Lime Jello Day. For some reason, they all loved that stuff. At the moment, Max couldn't have loved it more.

Up in his room, Max was busy stuffing his few worldly possessions into a pillowcase when Zippler appeared in the doorway. Leaning long and loose against the frame, head lolled to the side, his long greasy hair dangled in front of his pimply face. If scraggly had

a poster child, it would be Zippler.

“Whoa. It’s a dead man walking!” Zippler’s voice was coarse and choppy, as if he was perpetually talking through a fan.

“I’m not walking yet, but I’ll be walking right out of here soon.”

“Doubt it, dude.” Zippler inspected his dirty fingernails. “Spaz is going nuts over you spitting acid in his eyes last night. He’s packing a freakin’ staple gun with your name on it!”

Max stopped breathing and turned to Zippler. “A staple gun? Are you kidding me?”

Zippler laughed in short little bursts that seemed not to involve moving any air. “The dude can barely see, and he’s real angry ‘bout that. He’s gonna beat you to a pulp and staple you all up!”

“Do me a favor, Zippler, okay?” Max pleaded. “Don’t tell him where I am. I didn’t spit acid into his eyes. It was a power surge or something, and I just want to get out of here in one piece, that’s all.”

Another airless laugh, this one a bit nastier. “You kiddin’ me, Berger? No way I’m helping you escape. Spaz’d kill me too. I sent a kid to go get him. Should be here any sec.”

A ball of panic churned in Max’s stomach. If Spaz caught him, he’d end up in the hospital with a dozen broken bones and staples all over his body. It would mean stitches, casts, and crutches for months. This foster family would probably retract their paperwork. And he’d be unable to climb out the window to meet Sarina. Suddenly, his future had gone as dark as his past.

He had to get out of there. Now.

Clutching the pillowcase containing his meager belongings, he hopped across the two beds between him and Zippler.

“Ain’t nowhere to hide, little man,” Zippler said as Max went out the door.

“Berger!” Spaz growled from below. “I’m gonna’ kill you, you little freak!”

Max froze in the hallway. What to do? He was on the fourth floor, too far to call for Mr. Braun. His heart began pounding. He turned and ran back into the room to the window with the fire escape, lifted the sash, and reached his leg through.

“Berger’s going down the fire ‘scape, Spaz,” Zippler yelled into the hallway. “There’s a door down theres, third floor.”

Max froze. “Pretty smart for a kid with pepperoni for brains, Zippler.”

“We’ll see who’s pepperonis in a minute, Berger.”

A rumble arose from inside as Spaz stomped up the interior stairs. Feeling like a trapped rat, Max climbed the rest of the way out. He’d never make it down before Spaz made it to the third-floor door, and by now, the hallways would be jammed with kids coming to watch the show. That left only one option—going up. He turned and climbed the rusty stairs leading to the roof.

“Oh, now that’s smart, Berger,” Zippler yelled. “Ain’t nowhere to go that ways!”

Max ignored him, but Zippler had been right. It was a dead end. A padlock and chain secured a metal door providing access to a roof. Spaz thundered onto the fire escape one floor below and thumped up the metal stairs, causing the entire rickety metal structure to shake violently.

Max had never felt such absolute terror. In a few seconds, Spaz would be on him, beating him and shooting him full of staples. That would be the end of everything.

He'd end up a crumpled, broken, bloody mess in a pile here on this stupid fire escape. Fueled by panic, he put the pillowcase in his teeth and climbed onto the chipped metal railing, bringing the top of the building within reach. His legs wobbling for balance, he stretched up, grabbed the metal gutter running along the edge, and pulled.

His arms weren't strong enough.

Spaz marched toward him up the stairs with the stapler held out like a gun. "Payback time, Berger!"

Numb with fear, Max bent his knees and pushed as hard as he could off the railing, trying hard not to look down—it was certain death if he fell from this height. His body lurched upward and slightly out over the gap between him and the ground. Leveraging the force of the jump, he pulled with all his might on the rain gutter and managed to get half of his body over the edge.

Spaz raced forward and yanked the dangling pillowcase, nearly pulling Max and the gutter off the brick. "You ain't going nowhere, Berger!"

Max opened his mouth and let the pillowcase fall. With all his remaining strength, he pulled upward to get over the edge and rolled across the black tar roof.

"Get me up there. Now!" Spaz bellowed.

"Me lift you, Spaz?" Zippler asked.

"A bunch of yous together! Now do it! Give me a leg up!"

With his heart racing, Max watched Spaz's hand grab the edge of the rain gutter. Max scrambled to his feet and headed to the little service portal, but the metal door was locked from the inside.

No other option, he ran to the far side of the building. The gap to the next roof was at

least ten feet. Down in the alley below, a sickening distance away, a cook was standing in a streak of sunlight, smoking a cigarette near a grease barrel. It was a nearly impossible jump. He looked back at the edge. Spaz reached over, still holding the stapler, and then his massive ugly head appeared, red with anger and straining.

“Higher, you morons!” Spaz called to the kids below.

Panic seized Max’s brain. Should he attempt the jump? Was that insane?

Spaz’s chest rose up above the edge of the roof and then his leg. Max backed up and ran at the gap, stopping short at the edge, trying to imagine making it across. It seemed nearly impossible that he wouldn’t fall. If only he could fly like Sarina.

His brow furrowed as the thought of Sarina caused anger to sweep over him. He’d be happily on his way with Mr. Braun to meet his new family if it weren’t for her bringing the Orb into his life. She had said it would never awaken for him, but it had glowed so much that Spaz had seen it. It almost seemed as if the stupid thing was trying to cause trouble. And now he was supposed to find a way to sneak back here in a month from the suburbs at midnight to return the little troublemaker, just as he was finally given a chance to get out of this place?

Giving up on trying the impossible jump and hoping maybe he could calm Spaz down or negotiate a deal somehow, Max turned, but as he spun, something bizarre and terrifying happened—the world corkscrewed upside down. A blood-red moon replaced the sun, casting everything into an eerie, crimson glow. He was no longer on the roof of Helpren; he was standing on a cliff above a turbulent sea. Waves exploded like thunder against the jagged rocks. Marching toward him through the shadowy air in slow, jerky steps, black onyx eyes reflecting the moon, hair swirling like snakes, was the woman

from his vision in the boiler room.

She.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up; he felt like he'd slipped into a narcoleptic nightmare. Her gray lips parted, and she hissed venomous words through jagged teeth.

I've been waiting.

You cannot save them.

I will kill them all.

Max shook his head. "What the—"

The world corkscrewed again, and everything was back as it had been before, except that Spaz was charging toward him across the roof. The ugly, murderous scowl on his face made it clear that he intended to push Max over the edge.

I hope you enjoyed reading this sample. If you have any feedback to share, please email me at fred.gracely@gmail.com or find me on TikTok as @fredgracelyauthor and send me a message.

I'll be making Moon Spirit available for pre-order soon. Please join my mailing list at <https://www.fredgracely.com/> to stay updated about dates and progress.

Thanks!