

Twenty One

Darkness held dominion over the land, the moon and stars a lantern for the companions as they sought to stay on the narrow trail. For three long days no one had set foot outside the path; there was but one more day to go. They needed only to find the last marker.

Jinx's stomach rumbled, and Ruby gazed at the place from where the sound had emanated. "Shouldn't we already be at that place with the burning sand?" he asked with a child's impatience. "I'm hungry."

"This next stretch is the longest," Hawkwing told him. "Once we reach the haven, we won't have much farther to travel until we're out of the plains."

Arcturus turned to Kariayla and whispered, "Though we have yet to see a ghost." He winked at her, and she managed a slight smile. She was not as skeptical of Hawkwing's tale.

"Our tracker seems rather aloof," he continued, just loud enough for her to hear him.

Kariayla did not know how to respond. Arcturus had a tendency to be overly critical of Hawkwing, but perhaps Hawkwing's distance stemmed from Arcturus's attitude. "He seems friendly," she said, not wishing to take sides.

"Hm. That is another quality about him which troubles me."

Kariayla was about to respond, but her thoughts were interrupted by Jinx.

"Look at *that!*"

The five travelers came to an abrupt halt. Outside the path was a phenomenon the likes of which none of them could put into words. Luminous green mist was materializing low upon the ground, flashes of light pulsating from within. The unnatural vapor began to creep toward them, filtering through the tall grasses without stirring a single blade.

"By Jedinom!" Jinx exclaimed. "What is that?"

Hawkwing's brow creased with worry. He had a clear notion of what it was. "I suggest we keep moving." There was the slightest hint of urgency in his voice. He set forth at a quickened gait, and the others struggled to keep pace. Hawkwing was not speaking, and they did not ask questions.

Jinx lifted Ruby into his arms to prevent her from falling behind. His eyes widened to find their group was surrounded. As the mist reached the path, it collided with an invisible wall.

"See how it climbs upwards," Arcturus marveled.

"And over," Kariayla added, watching as the vapor passed over the apex of the invisible

barrier. It felt as though they were in a tunnel. “We’ll be trapped.”

“We were always trapped,” Arcturus muttered.

“What’re we gonna do?” Jinx pressed.

“We will continue to move forward,” Hawkwing announced over his shoulder, hoping to erase any doubt that the mist would find its way to them. His brisk walk bordered a light jog, the travelers almost running behind him. His focus was set on the next marker, but when his ears perceived the slowing of three sets of feet, he turned to see that the companions had stopped. Then they heard it.

The sheer terror on Jinx’s face spoke volumes. Arcturus announced what no one else dared to speak aloud. “The horn.”

Deep from within the mist came the low, resonant emission of a single horn. Its foreboding note carried, unflinching, for what seemed like minutes. The haunting instrument’s herald chilled the travelers to the core.

Then it ended.

Seconds after the horn fell silent, the companions remained still and quiet. Before any of them could comment, one last great flash of light expelled from the mist. The resulting effect left the group in absolute darkness.

“I’m blind!” Jinx shouted, clutching to Ruby, who trembled fiercely. Her whimpering filled the resounding silence.

Arcturus, his hand firmly wrapped around the Kariayla’s, moved past Jinx, nearly tripping over him along the way. He stopped where he assumed their guide should be at the front of the group. “Hawkwing?”

“I’m here, Arcturus,” he replied. He felt a hand clumsily reach out and grab at his sleeve.

“What has happened?”

Hawkwing did not answer.

“Where is everybody?” Jinx cried again. “I can’t see!” He flinched when he felt a hand land on his shoulder. “Who’s that?”

“It’s me,” Kariayla reassured him. “We’re all here.”

Hawkwing faced the direction of Jinx’s voice, stroking Snowfire’s feathers to calm her. “You’re not blind, Jinx. We…” He faltered.

Arcturus sighed in agitation. “There must be a logical explanation for this.”

“What’s going on?” Jinx demanded as he readjusted Ruby in his arms, her little hands clutching

at his neck. “Must be the ghosts,” he whispered when no one replied.

Kariayla held her hand an inch from her face, marveling at how she could not see it. If not for the ground beneath her, she would not be able to tell up from down. “How will we stay on the path?”

“I shall assume that responsibility,” Arcturus said. He whispered foreign words, and the tip of his staff began to glow. Its soft white light illuminated the uneasy expressions of the companions.

“Magic!” Jinx whispered in awe.

“This should suffice,” Arcturus said as though their problem had been solved. He lowered the staff toward the ground, casting the low-cut grass in the chalky hue. “Here is the path.”

“I suggest that we hold hands until we reach the marker,” Hawkwing advised. “Stay close.”

The companions did as was asked, their hands interlocked. The staff lit the way for Hawkwing as they slowly moved forward. Its light was but a candle flame in the midst of so much darkness, and whatever the distance between them and the next marker, it was not close enough.

Jinx slowed when he felt Ruby’s nails digging into his neck. He jostled the imp to loosen her grip, but it did no good. “What’s the matter with...you?” He faced her, his eyes drawn to something behind her.

Empty eye sockets bore into him from behind a mask of rotting flesh. Beneath the gruesome being was a steed of fire, its flames silently whipping without the aid of wind. Gray skin dangled from a bony arm directed at Jinx. The fleshless hand attached to it grasped a curved blade. An icy hush fell from the blackest depths of its undead mouth.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

The others turned so fast that they nearly lost their balance. Before any of them could lay their eyes upon what had frightened Jinx, Ruby had leapt from his arms and bolted. No one was quick enough to nab her. Wild-eyed, Jinx lunged after her, stumbling and knocking the lit staff from Arcturus’s grasp as he passed. The light vanished as the enchanted walking aid landed somewhere off-trail.

“Jinx!” both Hawkwing and Arcturus hollered in unison. “You must come back!” the tracker warned.

“I must go after him,” Arcturus decided.

“No!” Hawkwing placed a powerful grip on Arcturus’s wrist.

Surprised that he was able to find him with such accuracy in the pitch dark, Arcturus was speechless.

Hawkwing did not let go. “There must be another way.” He thought frantically for a solution. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came as he felt a gust of wind rush up against him. Recovering from the distraction, he returned his attention to Arcturus. “Your staff.”

“You specifically cautioned me that I not retrieve it!” Arcturus shouted.

“Did you see where it landed?”

Arcturus could not reply.

“I believe that I did. I’ll try and get it for you so you can light it as a beacon for Jinx.”

“I should go after him,” Arcturus insisted. “He needs my help.”

“You will help him,” Hawkwing said, “by lighting your staff. There’s no point in risking any more of us. Jinx will need your staff to find his way back. We must have faith in him.”

Arcturus sighed. “Be quick about it.”

Hawkwing released his grip on Arcturus’s wrist and took a deep breath before stepping into the tall grasses outside the path.

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Aw, Lorth....

Jinx stopped to look around. He could see nothing, his breathing the only perceivable sound. When he had dashed after Ruby, the others had called to him, but now their shouts were quiet.

“Ruby!” His cry was suffocated by the darkness. He tried again—in vain. He wondered what had become of the undead rider that had scared him. There was no sign of it now. Thankful, he resumed his blind search. Out of the corner of his eye, a pinpoint of light appeared dimly in the distance. Jinx figured the glow belonged to Arcturus’s staff. “So far away....”

They were there waiting for him, and thoughts of joining them crossed his mind with every pounding beat of his heart. “Not without Ruby,” he reasoned. “But...what if she’s back with them already?”

It was possible but not plausible. Ruby only clung to him; she would not go back without him. Jinx sighed. “But they’re worried about me. I can’t stay out here forever. What if one of those—” A sharp whistle sliced the air before he felt a sudden pain in his shoulder. While he did not see what had inflicted the damage, he was certain that he had been cut. He rubbed his hand over the torn cloth, his fingers gliding across the greasy warmth of blood.

He glimpsed a light—the light of flames.

“Uh-oh...” In that instant, his decision to return was made. He hoped that the imp would follow

the glow of the staff back to safety.

Breaking into a full run, Jinx noticed another flaming steed. With each step, more and more came into view. They had surrounded him. Before he could consider his options, his feet collided with something solid, and he tumbled to the ground. With a groan he started to rise, but a sudden blow to his stomach knocked the wind from him. He glanced downward, the light from the demons barely illuminating the imp. Her large eyes were somehow even larger, and in them he could see the reflection of the approaching riders.

Jinx lifted her into his arms and hugged her tightly to his chest. He started in the direction of Arcturus's staff, breaking into a jog, then a flat run. "Hold on, Ruby!"

He saw what looked like lightning, and there was a roar of thunder before a great gale shoved him forward. Next he knew, he was face-down, grass and dirt in his mouth. The imp whined beneath his weight. "Sorry, Ruby," he apologized. He stood and brushed his face clean before he realized that the moon was shining yet again. There were no demon riders to be seen.

"Jinx!" Arcturus cried. He ignored what Hawkwing had told him about leaving the sanctity of the trail and hurried to the thief's side. "Are you all right, my boy?" he puffed.

"I am now," Jinx said, relieved. He gathered Ruby in his arms and followed Arcturus back to the path.

Hawkwing approached them, Snowfire on his arm. "I see that you found Ruby."

"Yup." Jinx tousled her hair, though she did not smile, still terrified from what had transpired.

Hawkwing faced Arcturus. "I must speak with you."

Arcturus regarded him before noticing that one member of their group was not present. "Where is Kariayla?"

"That's what I need to tell you."

Jinx and Arcturus stared.

"She's missing."