

ONE



The Messenger

A cool wind blew over the ocean waves and onto the little island of Shaloke a few miles off the coast of the Carolinas. Winding through a mix of palm, cedar, and dogwood trees, the wind slipped into a sleeping village known by the same name. Wooden signs swayed and lights flickered to life in windows above the shops. A man walked along with a bucket in hand and poles slung over his shoulder, a young boy skipping beside him. They waved to a woman leaning out the first-floor window of a two-story house across the street. Near the center of town a water fountain bubbled into the air, the wind toying with droplets of water as they fell back to the ground. It swirled around the fountain, over a stone bench beside it, and continued down the lane. The town passed behind, and a wooden boardwalk snaked its way toward a row of cottages beside the beach. Slipping over marsh grasses and sand dunes, the wind gusted past the farthest building and around three children running along the beach.

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Another boy of some twelve years shuffled away from the children, shoving his rust-brown hair to the side, and plopped down beside a dune. The wind rushed on toward the north end of the island and past a dark shadow as the sun slipped behind the grass-covered dunes. An egret stared down from the bare branches of a bramble tree, and behind the boy, lights shone from the picture window framing the dining room of a white-walled beach house. Smoke curved into the sky as the boy glanced at the three children chasing each other back and forth along the beach. He reached into the cargo pocket of his canvas shorts and pulled out two folded and worn pieces of paper. Peeking again at the children, he unfolded one of the letters. The page was blank, marked only by creases. The boy leaned closer and blew gently across the paper. Light swirled over the page and glowing yellow letters formed under the fading sunlight.

Hey man,

I still can't believe you figured out how to make the letters disappear when someone else was around. Anyway, how's life on an island? Have you still not seen any nymphs or mermaids? Mom says they walk the beach most often in the evening as the sun is going down, so try then. Life is still kinda crazy here. They had another breach in the wards last night. ~~Mr. Rayburn~~ Captain Rayburn is constantly out at night. The Guard has patrols roving the entire holding. We haven't had anybody else get hurt, but the Elder Council is all up in arms about the dark creatures getting in. I overheard your grandpa say something about Mr. Thompson arguing selfishly about patrols and money, but it didn't make any

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sense to me honestly. He didn't seem real happy. Oh well, have fun. Hurry up and get back. Samantha won't shut up about you, it's kinda making me sick! Bring me back something cool. We'll talk to you soon.

Matt

15 July

Luke folded the letter and glanced around the empty dune. The egret squawked and took flight as Luke unfolded the second letter. Letters glowed dark red as he blew across it.

July 22

Luke,

I hope you're enjoying the island. Things here in Countryside are OK. Father spends a great deal of time with the Council and seems more upset each day. We've had two more attacks since I wrote you last. Your uncle and the Guard beat the darkmen back soundly both times, and no one was hurt, but people talking around town say it's disturbing that they're coming more frequently ... and that they're getting past the wards. So far we haven't had another soulless get into the holding ... Jeremy is recovering from his wounds, but the Council is still not sure how that last one got in.

The most interesting thing happened a few days ago, though. A group of kids were playing in the peach orchards near Sandy Island and suddenly a couple of dryads appeared. They seemed very agitated. Then almost immediately these dark little creatures

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popped out of a hole in the ground and took off running in the opposite direction of the dryads. They ran toward the children who of course ran screaming into town. It turns out the little creatures were gnomes! Can you believe it, gnomes. We haven't had gnomes since ... I haven't even ever seen a gnome! They're perfectly harmless to people it seems, well unless they catch you alone, but now the holding is covered with "hunting parties" of children. There's some grumbling on the Elder Council about why they're in Countryside, but I don't know anything about that, maybe Matt does.

Anyway, write when you can. I am sure you are having a blast and don't have much time though. We are all looking forward to you coming back.

Sam

Sam ...

Luke's mouth curled into a smile. He folded the letter back and ran his finger over the symbol pressed into the outside of the paper: the arch, tower, and teardrop-shaped flame indicating the letter originated in Holding Countryside. Luke thought of the cloaked riders who ferried mail between the holdings and the "outside."

I wonder if one of them will come tonight?

"Luke ... Luke!"

Luke started and shoved the letter back into his pocket. He looked toward the house, where his father stood waving to him in the fading light. Shadows crept toward the sea as the sun faded pink below the horizon. Trent, Jon, and Amy scampered up the boardwalk to the back of the house.

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"Coming, Dad." Luke stood and dusted off his pants, then froze.

Grrrrrrrrrr ...

He jumped around in a circle. A shadow flitted between two of the dunes. "Hello?" He squinted and stepped toward a large dune where the shadow had disappeared. The wind picked up again, howling past him inland as he padded forward on bare feet.

Grrrrrrrrrr ...

He stopped in his tracks as the sound deepened and the pendant on his chest warmed. Glancing at his feet, he noticed a print of some kind and leaned down.

Grrrrrrrrrr ...

Luke straightened back up. His eyes widened as a hulking shadow moved behind the dune. Green light burst into the sky from behind the dune, and he ducked his head.

Arr! Arr! Arr!

The light faded and Luke found himself alone. He took a step toward the dune but then stopped.

Maybe instead of staying out here and playing hide-and-seek with growling shadows, you should go in to dinner like you said you would, huh Rayburn?

Luke turned around and jogged toward the boardwalk under the gray of twilight.



Luke stood in the surf the next morning holding his hands over his head. Sweat poured off his forehead as the waves washed over the footprints that marked his run down the beach. Coach Williams's "suggested" workout list had arrived a couple of weeks before, and Luke's dad had offered him a glimpse of what opting out would feel like.

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"... took it easy on you last year ... this year will be kinda like having the wind knocked out of you and then someone telling you to run some more sprints ..."

Luke sucked in his breath and shook his head as his father's smiling face flashed through his mind.

"Luke! ... Luke, are you ready to go fishin'?"

Jon came running down the beach in rolled-up pants and a T-shirt. Luke laughed as his brother bounded into the water, splashing him. Luke picked him up and tossed him into a shallow wave rolling up the beach. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Jon stood up spluttering and laughing and ran at Luke. He tackled him into the water and they splashed back and forth until their father and Trent reached the edge of the water.

"How was your run?" his father asked.

Luke snorted as he stood up under the cloudless blue sky. "Brutal. I thought my heart was going to explode. If two-a-days are still hard after this, I'm gonna quit." Dragging Jon up out of the water, he turned and looked at his father. "I mean, seriously, Dad, Jon David's gonna have a heart attack!"

"Luke ..." His father frowned down at him, but the corners of his lips twitched as he tried to hold in a laugh. "Well, maybe a little fishing will help boost your spirits."

Luke smiled.

"Where are we going anyway, Dad?" Trent said.

"You'll see."

Thirty minutes later, Luke stepped over the low-lying, bent trunk of a live oak and stopped. A cove opened up in front of him. Live oaks and dogwoods surrounded the north and east sides, sand and rocks formed the south side, and in the distance rose the towering spire of a lighthouse. A yellow warbler flitted across his field of vision as Trent and Jon raced barefoot

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toward the blue-gray water. Luke's father grinned and patted Luke on the shoulder as he stepped past.

"Thought you might like it."

Luke smiled and followed his father to the edge of the water. He pulled out a pole and began casting into the water as his father helped Trent and Jon toss a net into the small waves. As egrets took flight off the bare branches of some still-standing dead trees, the sun rose out of the ocean and warmed the morning air, drying Luke's clothes. One of the white birds flapped its wings, gliding out over the cove before turning back inland. As Luke followed the bird's flight, his eyes turned to the water and his heart jumped. Two feet from where his father, Jon, and Trent stood casting nets, a pillar of water grew. Reaching just above Trent's head, water flowed up the center of the pillar and cascaded down the sides, sea-green light flashing in the middle.

Then the water formed into a woman in a glistening blue dress.

"Joseph Rayburn?"

Luke's body filled with warmth at the sound of her voice rising and falling with the waves. His father grimaced and nodded, pulling the net and the boys out of the water. "Yes, ma'am."

The woman dipped her head. "Greetings, I am Josephine. Your father sends a message to you." She raised her hand to the side and another pillar of water rose. Luke gasped as the pillar morphed into Grandpa Rayburn.

"Is that really—"

The woman smiled. "No, youngling, this is a mere projection of the man, to give the recipient a clearer understanding of the message."

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Luke stared back at his grandfather's face. He leaned forward, squinting as water flowed into the cove.

"You may touch it if you wish."

He brushed his hand against the water, distorting the figure of his grandfather. The water parted around his fingers just as if it were flowing around rocks in a stream. The water was cool, and as he removed his fingers, the figure returned to its previous shape.

"Wow."

Jon jumped up and down. "I wanna try, I wanna try."

Josephine nodded and Trent and Jon repeated Luke's experiment. Jon grinned and laughed as the water flowed over his hand. "Amy is gonna be sooo jealous!"

Luke's father pursed his lips. "I think that's enough for now, boys. You mentioned a message, ma'am?"

Josephine flicked her wrist toward the watery form of Grandpa Rayburn. Luke jumped as his grandfather's voice boomed.

"Joe, I hope y'all are having a good time. I'm sorry to bother you and the family, but we've come across some information I felt you should know." A smile crept onto Grandpa Rayburn's shimmering face. "Actually, I don't think it's anything that will affect you where you are, but ... it was either this or your mother was going to turn me out with the dogs and get on a train and come there. She still might, knowing her."

Luke's father chuckled.

"At any rate, as I'm sure you know from Landon, we've had quite a few attempted breaches this summer, some successful, most not. A couple of days ago, however, the Guard came across some tracks outside the wards." The watery Grandpa Rayburn sighed. "The tracks appear to be those of a pack of

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bane wolves ... and they appear to be following the direction of a man."

Luke's father mumbled a curse under his breath.

"We aren't certain yet, but ... you know the possible implication. There were also boot prints leading from inside the holding out. Again, I can hardly imagine this affecting you on the island, but ... There's no reason for you to come back early or any nonsense like that. Just be careful. Tell the kids and Sara we love them and are very much looking forward to seeing them again. Take care of yourself, son. I love you."

"You, too, Dad," Luke heard his father whisper as the form of Grandpa Rayburn cascaded back into the cove. The sun stood overhead as Josephine turned her gaze back to Luke's father.

"Have you any reply?"

Luke's father stared down at the sand. Gulls called in the distance, and wind whistled through the rocks at the entrance to the cove. After a few moments, he raised his head and frowned at Josephine. "Dad, we'll return if necessary and will send word if we learn of anything here. Be careful, and make sure that knucklehead of a brother of mine stays that way, too. We love you." He paused. "That should do it. Thank you, ma'am."

Josephine nodded. "He will hear, Joseph Rayburn."

With a twist, Josephine dropped back into the water, and the lapping waves of the cove swallowed her.



Carrying an armload of tackle, Luke dodged around the trunk of a sable palm as his father strode down the path to the beach house.

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"Luke, when we get back, help your brothers get y'all's room picked up."

Luke frowned. "Yes, sir. Dad, what was that ... lady back there?"

His father climbed over a dune and helped Jon scramble up beside him. "That was an ocean nymph."

"Well, how did she get a message from Grandpa?"

"Probably from the dryads in Countryside. Flame creatures will often carry messages for those who are kind to them, or who they feel have the need. Your grandfather has been among the few people of Countryside who've consistently helped and fought alongside them. They would do a great deal for him" — he watched Luke as they stepped up onto the boardwalk — "and for anyone associated with him. There may have been other motivations, but I suspect your encounters last year with dryads resulted from your relationship to him as much as from your need."

Luke frowned. "Oh ..."

"Don't get too down in the mouth, Luke. They seem to like you well enough on your own merits."

Luke smiled again as his father chuckled.

"Joe!"

Luke stopped with his foot on the beach house's bottom step at the sound of his mother's voice. Looking to the south, he saw her walking along the boardwalk. A half-mile behind her, a bell tower and a steeple rose above storefronts of the seaside village. She held Jodi's hand and carried bulging canvas bags with her other hand. Amy skipped along in front of them in a white summer dress to match her mother's, carrying two bags of her own.

Luke's father closed his eyes for a moment. "Well, boys, do you think they left anything in the stores?"

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Luke and his brothers laughed. Their father waved back at his mother and shook his head with a smile. "I guess we oughta go help th—"

"Dad, what kinda animal makes this print?"

Luke looked where Trent was pointing beside the boardwalk. Half a print was visible in a spot where beach sand mingled with dirt.

"I can put my whole hand in here, Dad." Trent grinned as he placed his hand within the outline of the print and looked up at his father.

Luke peered at the print as his father knelt beside it. A dark look passed over his face.

"Hmmm ... I don't know, Trent, maybe someone's dog around here. What do you think?"

"I don't know, Dad, that looks awful big for a dog."

That would've been a huge dog—and it looks like the same kind of print from last night!

"Boys, if it's not too much to ask, do you think you could stare at the sand later?!"

Luke jerked his head up as his mother struggled with her bags a few feet away. Trent and Jon bolted over.

"Mom, Mom, guess what ..."

"... at the cove ..."

"... and Grandpa talked to us ..."

They jumped up and down as they told their mom about the nymph. Amy's eyes grew to the size of saucers, her mouth dropping open. "And I missed it!" she said, stamping her foot.

Luke felt a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go save your mother," his father said with a grin before stepping onto the boardwalk. He walked over to Luke's mother, took her bags, and gave her a kiss. "Sorry, hon."

As Luke stepped onto the boardwalk, he looked back down,

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but this time he didn't see the print—it was gone, sand brushed over it.



The fire burned brightly on the sand under the light of shining stars and the waning crescent of the moon. Jon and Amy played a game of stones, or damk'or, sitting across from each other on a blanket while Jodi tried to eat the smooth rocks. Trent held an empty glass training sphere in his hand. His grandmother had sent it from Countryside, and Trent sat staring at it. Every few seconds, a spark of light would flash in the sphere and fade. Trent would sigh, blink his eyes, and stare at the orb again.

Luke watched the flames and sparks dance up into the night sky as his parents leaned against a piece of driftwood beside him. He gazed at the red light to the north.

Seems higher this year ... Only six years left, according to Mr. Roberts. Luke watched the star float in the darkness above the waves. He may not think it means the end of the world like the prophecy says, but I bet it's still not a good sign. I've gotta get my hands on the Book of the Wise again ... Maybe I can figure something else out, since apparently reading Ancient is one of my talents now.

Luke screwed a marshmallow onto the end of the stick in his hand and studied the flames. He closed his eyes and a picture of Samech and a fire in an open field flashed by. Opening his eyes again, he grinned. Little flames jumped from the logs to roll over the marshmallow, turning it from white to black. After a few seconds, he leaned forward and blew the flames out. To his side, Trent glared up at him.

"Show-off."

"You'll get there someday, little brother, and probably be better at it than I ever will be."

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Trent feigned a smile and turned back to his sphere. He glared at it and a spark exploded into a flame in its center. Trent jumped and the flame vanished. He gaped at Luke.

"See, I told you, just keep—" Luke froze as his chest warmed and movement caught the corner of his eye. "Dad ..."

Grrrrrrrrrr ...

That's the same sound!

Luke looked to his right and felt his blood run cold. Ten feet away, his father crouched with a silver-and-red blade lifted in front of his face. On the other side of the blade stood a wolf almost as tall as his father, with fur the color of the night sky between the stars. The wolf eased forward, tongue lolling to one side. It looked around the circle as Luke's mother pulled everyone except Luke to her side.

"Sara, as soon as it moves, get the children inside."

The wolf cocked its head and looked at Luke's dad, then up at the sky.

Ahoooooooooooo!!!

Shivers ran up Luke's arms and he covered his ears as he took a step back.

"Momma," Jon whimpered, and Amy pulled closer to their mother.

Another howl answered in the distance, and another. Luke lost count of them.

"Luke, take Jodi," his mom said. "When I run, you and Trent run, too. Get inside the house no matter what. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Luke said, never taking his eyes off the wolf.

The wolf turned and eyed Luke as he moved. His gums pulled back, and that was the last warning they had. The wolf leaped forward. Luke grabbed Jodi and took off after his mother and Trent, with Jon and Amy in front of them. He slipped

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in the sand as he climbed up the first dune, falling and losing his grip on Jodi.

Grrrrrrrr ...

Luke cringed at the wolf's growl and jerked his head over his shoulder. The animal snarled but circled in the opposite direction from Luke and Jodi. Silver-blue light surrounded his father. A dark red streak marked the wolf's left side.

Jodi's crying filled Luke's ears, and heat bubbled up in his chest.

If I surrounded the wolf with darkness ...

The voice of Josiah, Luke's Fundamentals of Light teacher, sounded in his head: ... *only with regard to how to defeat it or defend against it.*

Luke ground his teeth. *I am trying to defend against it!*

As he stared at the wolf, blackness darker than ink surrounded it. The creature snarled and snapped at the cloud. Luke poured in more darkness and the wolf shook its head, rearing up off the sand.

Luke's father jerked his head around. "Luke, the house, now!"

Luke shivered and the darkness vanished. He turned toward Jodi as the wolf lunged at his father.

What were you thinking, Rayburn?!

He picked himself up, snatched Jodi back into his arms and dashed away.

Ahooooooooooo!!!

The howls were closer now. Luke bounded up the stairs and into the dining room, where his mother and siblings stared out the window.

"Luke, what happened? Are you two all right? Where's Dad?"

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He slammed the door behind him and shook his head. Jodi clung to his shoulder, clasping his shirt and his skin in her fists.

"I don't know, Mom. The wolf jumped for us, but Dad sliced a pretty good gash in its side. And ... he told me to get to the house and ... I don't know."

His mother turned back to the window. Orange light flared past the dunes and disappeared. Nothing moved in the darkness. In the distance, a dim glimmer of the moon reflected off the surface of the ocean.

Luke's mother gasped. "Joe!" She dashed toward the door and out onto the porch. His father stumbled up from the shadows and into her embrace. Blood covered most of his clothes as he stepped inside.

"It's OK, Sara, it's not from me. I'm fine, hardly a scratch."

Luke saw light glisten in his mother's eyes.

His father looked around at each of the five faces staring up at him. "We'll be fine in here, OK?"

Heads bobbed up and down.

"Dad, what're we gonna do?" Luke said.

"Tonight we're going to go to sleep, Luke. Everyone can bed down here in the living room. The wolves won't be able to get in tonight and they'll be gone by morning. Tomorrow, we're going back to Countryside."

With that, he pulled the door shut and ran his hands over it. A blue light cascaded down from the roof of the house to the sand below, and then the darkness of night rushed back in.



Luke rubbed his eyes and raised his head off the pillow. Pain throbbed in his right leg and he turned to see Trent's head resting on it, drool soaking the blanket.

"Ugh."

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Luke shook his leg and pushed the blanket off. Trent's head smacked down on the tile floor and Luke winced.

"Mmmmm." Trent turned his head and lay still again.

Luke sighed and walked over to where his father sat staring out the back window in a dining-room chair. A pink sky covered the horizon out across the ocean as waves rolled in. Gulls soared through the air, and in the distance ships inched across the water.

"Mornin', Dad ... You OK?"

His father turned red eyes up at Luke. A tan ceramic mug sat beside him, filled with black liquid. A half-smile grew on his father's face, wrinkles forming around his eyes.

"I've had worse nights ... Did you get any sleep?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I slept great, after I put a pillow over my head."

His father chuckled. "Jon does seem to be able to out-snore even your mother."

Luke's eyes widened, and his father gave him a sly smile.

"If you tell her I said that, I'll deny it."

Luke shook his head and then froze as he noticed dark stains on his father's jeans. "Dad, did ... anything else come by last night?"

His father grimaced and looked back out the window toward the beach. "We had a few visitors ... but none ventured to come inside." His eyes narrowed as he looked at Luke. "We need to talk about something else though, Luke."

"What, sir?"

"Last night, when you stumbled on the way to the house, you did something I don't want to ever see you do again."

Luke swallowed.

"You used darkness."

"But Dad I ... I think it would've worked. And I was just trying to help stop that wolf."

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"I know, Luke. I know my son, and I know you were only trying to help, but never ... *never* with darkness. You can't control it no matter what you think, and you see what it does to those who use it. Darkness only hurts; it never helps, son. It twists your senses and it scars your soul. No matter how good your intentions, it's never worth it. Do you understand me, son?"

Luke felt his throat tighten and he dropped his head. "Yes, sir."

"Luke ..." He saw his father's legs shift and felt calloused hands lift his face. A smile spread across his father's weathered face, and his eyes pulled Luke in. "Son, you make me so proud, and I love you so much. You were very brave last night, and I'm not mad at you ... I'm concerned for you. I haven't done a good enough job teaching you about this world you've been thrown into, but I'll fix that, I promise. You must trust me on some things, though, until you're old enough to understand them. This is one of those things."

Luke nodded and wiped away tears with the back of his hand. His father embraced him, and Luke stood quietly with his eyes closed.

When his father stepped back, he arched his eyebrows. "You OK?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." His father winked at him and then looked at the floor where his wife and children slept among a mountain of blankets. "I hate to wake them up, but ... I guess we'd better. Lord only knows what else will come searching for us if we're still here tonight."

Luke swallowed as his father stood and stretched. *That doesn't sound good.*

"Get dressed and I'll get them rolling. We need to be out of

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here early if we're going to make it to the tunnel. The train from Chesterton is the only one I know of traveling to Countryside today, and I'd just as soon not have to hump all this luggage back home on foot."

"Yes, sir."

An hour later, Luke stood on the front porch in leather boots, jeans, and a long-sleeved work shirt. Jon and Amy sat on top of a pile of bags and a couple of suitcases next to a flat cart.

"All right, Rayburns, we're gonna go home a bit differently than how we got here. Because, Trent," — Luke's father sighed and held up his hand to head off Trent's question — "I don't want anything out there waiting on us." Trent snapped his mouth shut. "We're gonna walk down to the dock and the ferry landing in town. Once we get on the mainland, we'll ride a bus back a few minutes toward Holding Chesterton and then take the train there through the tunnel back to Countryside ... OK, everybody ready?"

Heads bobbed as Luke and Trent helped pick up bags and stack them on the cart. Jon and Amy followed their mother and Jodi down the stairs and to the north. Trent stepped off after them, but as Luke's foot hit the first stair, his father grabbed his arm and leaned down inches from his ear.

"Luke, when your chest gets warm today, I need to know, immediately."

"Yes, sir."

His father nodded and clapped him on the back.

I know that isn't good.



A few hours later, Luke stood on a train platform as a black locomotive puffed toward him from behind a screen of ash and oak trees. Its brakes screeched as it rolled to a stop. He

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craned his neck, staring from person to person as they boarded the blue-and-black passenger car. He grasped his pendant as a couple of darkmen walked past, oblivious to him; the sphere warmed almost imperceptibly. A centaur strode down a ramp from a few cars behind him. Men in blue-and-green holding-guard uniforms stood in position around the station. His father helped his mother gather the children and herd them toward the second car. As Luke bent over to pick up suitcases, he felt heat radiate from his pendant. A man in a gray duster bumped into him as Luke jerked his head up. "Dad."

His father stopped and looked over his shoulder. His eyes narrowed and he nodded as Luke grabbed the pendant through his shirt. Nudging Luke's mother and siblings toward the conductor punching tickets, he stepped back toward Luke. "Did you notice anything?"

"Just a couple darkmen a minute or so ago," Luke said, "but the pendant hardly warmed up at all."

"All right, let's ease toward the car, but scan the crowd."

Men and women jostled up the stairs and across the platform, most of them looking down at their feet. Turning in a circle, Luke searched the crowd. Halfway through his turn, he stopped. The man in the gray duster stood staring at him. He had wiry black hair and weeks of growth on his unshaven face. Yellowed, feral eyes and a smile that was more of a snarl bore into Luke. His heart hammered in his chest and his arms trembled. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to move or think until a woman wearing a large feathered hat walked in front of him, blocking his view of the man. Luke blinked, shaking himself free of the gaze. "Dad!"

His father stopped his own searching and darted over to Luke.

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"Dad, that man, there ..." He pointed, but then his arm sagged. The man was gone.

"Where?"

Luke shook his head. "He's gone."

Pursing his lips, Luke's father pulled him back toward the train car. "Let's get on board."

Luke followed his father, looking around them as they climbed the stairs. They walked down the aisle and squeezed into one of the compartments, his father sliding the door shut behind them. Luke walked to the window and stared down into the crowd as his father's shadow slipped over him. "Luke, what did the man look like?"

"Like he hadn't bathed in a month. Half-grown beard. Nasty teeth and ... yellow eyes."

His father grimaced. "Yellow eyes—you're sure, son?"

"Yes, sir. They seemed almost like they were ... glowing. Why, Dad? What does that mean?"

"What makes you think he was the one causing the pendant to warm?"

Luke stared off into the distance. "The way he stared at me ... He made me afraid ... I couldn't move. It was almost like I was trapped ... but I don't know, the pendant didn't actually feel too warm when he was looking at me, and now it feels a little warm again." Luke shrugged.

"The pendant won't tell you everything, at least in my experience. It's more like a guide." His father stared out the window with him as the train rocked forward. After a few moments, he clapped his hand on Luke's shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with fear, Luke. It's often what keeps us alive in dangerous situations. Anyone who says they've never tasted fear is lying ... to you or to themselves. The trick is to not let the feeling

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overwhelm you—to learn to control it.” He eased back into his seat, lifting Jodi to his lap.

The train trundled down the tracks and past the shadows of the pine forest. A few clouds dotted the sky, and red birds flitted through the air. Warmth spread across Luke’s chest, and he grabbed the pendant hanging there, but as the train rounded the first corner, the warmth faded. He turned away from the window to see his father tickling Jodi. Jon and Amy pulled out a fist-size globe that Grandma Rayburn had given them and watched blue flowers bloom and petals fall. Every time they touched the globe, the process began anew. Trent sat in a corner and flipped a page of Gottfried’s *On War and the Holdings*, which Uncle Landon had mailed him. Luke plopped down in his seat and pulled out the clear practice globe Trent had worked with the day before. A flame appeared in the globe and the color changed from red to orange to yellow. Luke let the flame vanish, but yellow eyes filled his mind as the blue-white light and the stones of the traveling tunnel enveloped the train and sent it toward Countryside.