

# CHAPTER 1

THE OLD MAN SAT IN HIS CHAIR AND WATCHED THE FIRE WITH HIS ONE GOOD eye. Two ravens perched nearby, Thought and Memory. He ignored them the way one ignores familiar companions or unwanted guests.

Sometimes he wondered which they were.

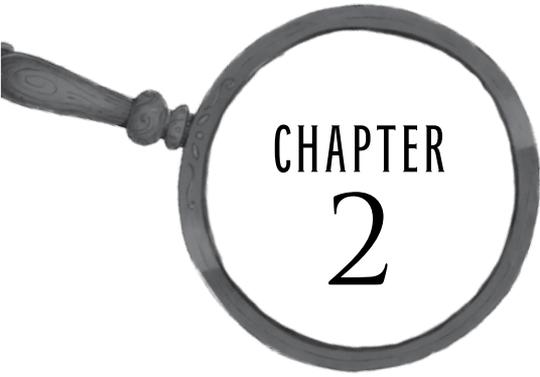
As he gazed into the fire before him, he imagined he could see images of gods, giants, and mortals in the dancing flames. They acted out the events of their lives like performers in a show, each playing her or his role.

Now events were occurring that forced him to think about the performance's conclusion.

Sitting there, alone, the old man thought about the days to come.

He thought about the future.

So far, it was going just the way he remembered it.



## CHAPTER 2

"MISTER FOX IS A JERK!"

ABE looked around to see if anybody was close enough to have heard Pru's shout. Fortunately, he and Pru stood in a remote section of Middleton Cemetery. The only bodies nearby lay six feet under the ground and probably weren't very interested in Pru's frustration with their former mentor. They stayed quiet.

ABE did, too.

He'd learned that there were two things you didn't talk to Pru about when she was in this kind of mood: One, Mister Fox. Two, everything else.

It was best to just let her work through things on her own.

"He said we'd see him again," Pru complained.

“Well, *technically*, he said it was true we wouldn’t see him.” The words were out before ABE could stop them. So much for staying quiet.

Pru put her hands on her hips. “You know, ABE, one of these days I’m going to teach you that honesty isn’t *always* the best policy.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Pru said, letting her arms fall to her sides. She sat down on a tree stump and flashed ABE a smile. “It’s not you I’m mad at. Not really. Seriously, though. Didn’t you think we’d see him again?”

“Yeah, I did. I mean, especially since you thought we would. You always understood him better than I did. Well, except for the time you thought he was Loki and tried to set fire to his house . . .”

“Not helping, ABE. Don’t make me change my mind about not being mad at you.”

“Right.”

Pru sighed. “It’s been almost a year.”

“Almost,” ABE agreed. Mister Fox had arrived in Middleton in his magical Henhouse, headquarters of the Fantasy Investigation Bureau—or, as Mister Fox called it, the Unbelievable FIB—in October of the year before. He’d come to investigate an invasion of gods and giants from Norse mythology.

That’s what Mister Fox did. He investigated mysteries that involved magic and myth. But he didn’t do

it alone. He couldn't. He needed the help of kids. They had a talent for seeing magic where others couldn't. So Mister Fox had recruited ABE and Pru to become Fibbers, junior members of his detective agency. Together, they'd vanquished giants and foiled the attempts of Loki, the Norse trickster, to recover a magical artifact called the Eye of Odin.

But that had all happened last year. Now it was the end of August and school was about to start. Pru and ABE had spent the better part of a year waiting for Mister Fox's return, hiking the wooded trails around Middleton at least once a week. Pru called it patrolling and insisted they do it just to be on the safe side. Their patrols almost always ended in the cemetery, where they could check to see if the Henhouse had returned.

It never had.

Neither had Ratatosk the Insult Squirrel. That's what Pru called him, anyway. Really, Ratatosk was the messenger of the Norse gods. But since so many of the messages he carried were insults, he had developed a rather . . . unique . . . way of speaking to people. Despite that, Ratatosk had become their friend, and ABE missed his company as much as Pru did.

In fact, all the Mythics (Mister Fox's term for beings from Worlds of Myth) who had been in Middleton had left after their battle over the Eye. Even the town patriarch, Old Man Grimmir, who was really Odin in

disguise, had left. According to the people who ran the museum wing of his mansion, he'd "gone traveling." No one knew when he'd be back.

"Mister Fox could still show up," ABE said, slipping his looking glass, a gift from the detective, back into his belt.

The looking glass resembled a normal magnifying glass. It had a wooden handle with a brass raven's head at its base and a brass frame around the glass itself. But the device was anything but normal. One side of the glass was actually a mirror that had the power to banish Mythics back to their own world. The other side functioned like a regular magnifying glass, except it could also identify and track Mythics that appeared on Earth.

"I know he *could* still show up. But will he?" Pru glanced at ABE out of the corner of her eye. "I still think we should try my idea to catch his attention in case the Henhouse goes by overhead."

"Pru . . . I figured it out. It would take about fifty-two fallen trees to spell out *MISTER FOX, COME BACK*. And that's assuming all the logs were the same size. I'm not sure we could cut down that many trees. I definitely don't think we should be setting dozens of dead trees on fire."

"Fine." Pru stuck her tongue out. "I'll come up with a new plan."

Pru stood up on the tree stump and pulled her own

looking glass from her messenger bag. It looked a lot like ABE's, only it had a squirrel's head at the base of its handle. She held the glass to her eye and spun in a slow circle. When she'd completed one rotation, she sighed again and slipped her glass back into her bag.

"What if this is it, ABE? What if he doesn't come back and this is it? Just this . . . every day, forever?"

ABE didn't know what to say. A part of him did want to see Mister Fox again. Another part of him wasn't sure. He still had nightmares about when Loki and his chief frost giant, Gristling, had abducted him and taken him to Asgard, the world of the Norse gods.

Silence filled the space between them as the late afternoon sun warmed their skin. Finally, Pru glanced at her watch. "I guess we should be getting back. Tonight's the open house. I can't believe it's time to go back to school already."

"Yeah," ABE agreed. He found himself thinking of fresh school supplies and crisp new textbooks with spines that crackled when you opened them for the first time.

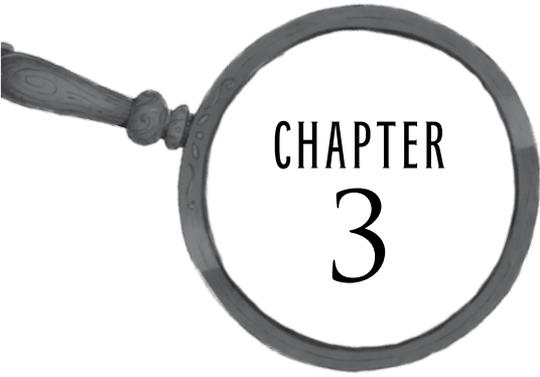
"What do you look so happy about?" Pru asked, eying him suspiciously.

"Me? Oh, nothing." Pru was coming out of her mood about Mister Fox. ABE didn't want to push her buttons by admitting that he was actually excited about the start of a new school year.

“I was just looking at the bright side of school starting,” he said instead.

“Which is?”

“Well, we may have to go back to school. But at least you—*we*—won’t have to see Mrs. Edleman anymore.”



## CHAPTER 3

AS HE AND HIS DAD DROVE TO THE SCHOOL THAT NIGHT, ABE WONDERED IF HE had been too optimistic earlier.

It was true that, as seventh graders, he and Pru wouldn't be in Mrs. Edleman's class—or Cell Block E, as Pru called it—any more. Unfortunately, Middleton was so small that the junior high school was just an addition to the elementary school. It didn't even have its own entrance. So while he and Pru would no longer have to endure Mrs. Edleman's tyrannical approach to public education, they were still likely to see their former teacher every once in a while.

“So,” his dad said, “I bet you're disappointed about school starting, huh?”

“Me? Oh . . . yeah.” ABE folded up the class schedule he’d been studying and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Right? I know I always hated the end of summer vacation when I was a kid. No more pickup games of Wiffle ball or touch football . . .”

ABE fiddled with his seat belt as his dad’s voice trailed off. He tried to think of something he and his dad had in common that they could talk about to fill the sudden quiet. He was still thinking when they pulled into the school’s parking lot.

“Well, here we are,” his dad said. “And look, there’s Pru and her mom.”

“ABE, over here!” Pru said, waving, as he and his dad got out of the car. “Hey, Mr. Evans. Catch the game last night?”

“Sure did, sport!”

ABE walked around the back of the car and greeted Pru’s mom. “Hi, Mrs. Potts.”

“Hi, ABE.” She ruffled his hair. She kind of had a fascination with his curly hair. He didn’t mind. “Hi, Gavin. No Maddie tonight?”

“Working, unfortunately.”

“That’s too bad. Well, shall we head inside?” Pru’s mom said. “Ready for a new year, Pru?”

“If I say no can I have another month of summer vacation?”

“Nice try, kiddo.”

They joined the flow of people walking from the parking lot to the school buildings. The first fallen leaves of the season blew across the pavement in front of them as they approached the entrance.

“What room are we looking for?” Pru’s mom asked as they stepped inside.

“Thirteen,” Pru answered. “I can’t believe our homeroom is number thirteen. Like that’s not an omen.”

“There are no such things as omens,” Pru’s mother said. “Don’t read anything into a room number. There’s no predicting the future.”

Pru looked back at ABE and raised her eyebrows dramatically. He hid a grin.

“Looks like this is us,” ABE’s dad said when they found the right room.

ABE let Pru, her mom, and his dad go in first. He followed them but stopped short just inside the doorway, surprised by the appearance of their new homeroom.

Mrs. Edleman’s classroom had been set up with neat rows of desks all facing the front of the room. The walls had been covered with rules.

The desks in this new classroom had been clustered together into makeshift tables with four or five chairs around each. Posters of book covers and pictures of authors lined the walls. ABE beamed when he saw his favorite book, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, among them.

He pulled out his folded schedule. It said what his classes were, and when. It also listed his teachers. He hadn't paid too much attention to his teachers at first—he hadn't recognized any of their names. Now he looked more closely and saw that he had the same teacher for homeroom and language arts, Mr. Jeffries.

“Hey. Who's that?” Pru asked as the four of them settled into seats around a table near the back and a young man with neatly trimmed stubble stepped to the front of the room.

“The adult standing at the front of your homeroom?” Pru's mother asked. “Well, if I was going to go out on a limb, I would guess that's your homeroom teacher. Said the mother to her would-be-detective daughter.”

“Funny, mom. Seriously, though. You think? But he's wearing sneakers. Do teachers wear sneakers? Do they even own them? Weird. Imagine Mrs. Edleman in sneakers.” Pru shivered in her seat. “Ouch. I think I just broke my brain.”

“Shush,” her mom said, giving Pru a playful nudge with her elbow. “You'll get me in trouble. There's no talking in class.”

ABE smiled. Pru had said she and her mom hadn't always gotten along so well. But they seemed to have a great relationship from what ABE had seen over the

past year. He glanced at his dad, who directed a glassy-eyed stare to the front of the room.

“Hi, everyone, and welcome to Middleton Junior High School,” the man with the stubble and sneakers said. He gestured to a poster on the wall beside the whiteboard. “One of my favorite poets, Jean Inglelow, once wrote:

*Children, ay, forsooth,  
They bring their own love with them when they come,  
But if they come not there is peace and rest . . .*

“Since you’ve all been good enough to show up tonight, I suppose I can say good-bye to peace and rest.”

Chuckles and snorts of laughter filled the room. ABE was surprised that some of the laughter came from Pru.

Not everyone was amused, though. A boy at the table next to theirs whispered to his friend, “*Forsooth?* Who says that? What does it even mean?”

“Actually,” ABE said, turning in his seat, “*sooth* is another word for *truth*, so *forsooth* basically means ‘in truth.’ It’s an old English word and—”

Beside him, Pru groaned. ABE turned back to look at her and saw his dad studying the table, red-faced.

“I did the whole ABE-the-walking-dictionary thing again, didn’t I?” he whispered to Pru. She nodded. ABE

heard snorts of laughter from the table next to theirs. He sank into his chair as his teacher continued speaking.

“I’m kidding, of course. I’m thrilled to see everyone here tonight. I’m Mr. Jeffries. Everyone who’s too young to drive a car, I’m going to be your homeroom teacher and your language arts teacher. For everyone else in the room, I’m one of the people your child will likely be complaining about for the next nine months or so. Sorry for that.”

More laughter.

“Careful, kiddo,” Pru’s mother said, leaning in to whisper to Pru. “Someone might actually think you’re enjoying yourself at school.”

Mr. Jeffries kept them a little longer. He explained the school’s website and gave out his e-mail address. Then he invited all the students (and their families) to walk around and meet the rest of their teachers in other classrooms.

“Well, I guess that wasn’t *too* painful,” Pru admitted to ABE later in the evening as they left the gym. She’d checked first to make sure their parents were out of earshot behind them.

“Yeah. Mr. Jeffries seems nice. And funny.”

“A little, I guess. He’s an improvement over you-know-who at least.” Pru stopped short, her eyes suddenly narrowed. “Oh, man. Speak of the devil.”

ABE followed Pru’s gaze. Mr. Jeffries was walking

down the hall toward them, but he wasn't alone. Mrs. Edleman walked by his side.

"Abe," Mrs. Edleman said, looking down over her glasses as they approached. "How nice to see you. And Prudence, of course."

"Hi, Mrs. Edleman," ABE said.

"Mrs. Edleman," Pru said. ABE imagined he could hear western showdown music in the background.

"Are these former students of yours, Mrs. Edleman?" Mr. Jeffries said. "How nice! I believe I have the pleasure of having them both in my homeroom. ABE and Prudence, isn't it? Sorry. I'm still learning names."

"It's *Pru*."

ABE didn't think Pru realized how snappish she sounded. Mrs. Edleman sort of had that effect on her.

"So, um, did you have a nice summer, Mrs. Edleman?" he said to change the subject.

"I did, Abraham, thank you for asking."

"It's . . . uh . . . I'm not . . ." That wasn't his name. ABE was an acronym, a nickname made from the initials of his real name, Aloysius Bartholomew Evans. Should he correct Mrs. Edleman? Before he could decide if it was okay to correct a teacher, his dad and Pru's mom stepped up behind them.

"Mrs. Edleman," Pru's mom said with a nod as she placed a hand on Pru's shoulder. Mrs. Edleman returned the nod.

“Mrs. Potts. Mr. Evans. A pleasure to see you both. Did you enjoy the open house?”

“We did,” Pru’s mom said. “In fact, we’d just finished up and were about to go get some ice cream. Gavin and ABE, would you like to join us?”

“Sounds good,” ABE’s dad said.

“Yeah,” ABE agreed, admiring how quickly Pru’s mom had managed to get them out of the chance encounter with Mrs. Edleman.

It just wasn’t quick enough.

“Prudence,” Mrs. Edleman said before they could make their escape, “just remember, this is a new year. That means a fresh start. I’m sure you will make the most of it. There’s no need to repeat past mistakes and problem behaviors.”

Pru’s face turned bright red. ABE followed her gaze from Mrs. Edleman to Mr. Jeffries, and he saw their new teacher watching the exchange with raised eyebrows.

Pru was about to lose it. ABE needed to say something to distract her. What? He could ask Mr. Jeffries how he liked Middleton, since he was new to the school. Or was that a weird question to ask a teacher? He needed to say *something*.

“Let’s go, Pru,” her mother said, instead, rescuing Pru (and ABE).

ABE breathed a sigh of relief. Realizing that he was shifting his weight from foot to foot, he forced himself to stop. His mom always laughed when he did that, but in a nice way. She said it reminded her of when he was a toddler and just learning to walk. She said he would walk in place, like he couldn't decide which way to go.

"Mom, did you hear her?" Pru said when they'd walked a little way down the hall. "That was so embarrassing."

"I heard, honey. And I don't like it, either. But there's nothing to be done about it now. I'm sure it will blow over once the year starts."

Pru didn't say anything. She just looked back. ABE did, too. Mr. Jeffries and Mrs. Edleman were standing close together, talking. He saw Mrs. Edleman point in their direction—he was sure she had pointed at Pru. Mr. Jeffries frowned.

When ABE looked back at Pru, her face was still as red as her hair. He sighed.

Cell Block E might not be as easy to escape as they had hoped.



The air outside the ice-cream parlor smelled of a delicious combination of pine trees and the shop's special homemade hot fudge. ABE, his dad, and Pru's mom settled into a picnic table behind the store. Pru had gone back inside for napkins.

ABE looked up at the colored pennants that lined the picnic area. They flapped in the evening breeze. Gazing beyond the flags, ABE was disappointed to see clouds rolling in. He had hoped for a view of the stars.

“Why does the air always seem to smell so much better in the summer?” Pru’s mother asked, inhaling deeply.

“Actually, it doesn’t just seem to,” ABE said. “It really does. I read an article about how odor molecules don’t travel so well when it’s cold, so there’s not as much to smell.”

“ABE, you are a marvel!” Pru’s mother pointed her spoon at him. “You have so much knowledge floating around in that head of yours. Gavin, you must be so proud.”

ABE looked at his dad, who blinked. “Yeah, he’s a smart kid all right. Certainly doesn’t get it from me. When I was his age all I cared about were sports and cars.”

“He’s been a good influence on Pru, that’s for sure. I think she read more this summer than she has in the past . . . well, eleven years. Who’d have guessed she’d like mythology so much? Speaking of Pru . . .” Her mother paused to look around. “Where’s she gotten to? How hard is it to find napkins?”

“I’m sure she’ll be right out,” ABE said.

“Yeah. It’s an ice-cream parlor. How much trouble could she get into?” Pru’s mother’s eyes crinkled in a

smile. “Then again, this *is* Pru we’re talking about. We might want to have the National Guard standing by.”

She and his dad laughed. Even ABE smiled.

“Maybe I should go check on her,” Pru’s mom said, setting her cup of ice cream on the table.

“I’ll go,” ABE said, glancing at his dad. “I, uh, want to use the bathroom anyway.”

As he walked around the building to the front entrance, he wondered if he should he have said *restroom* instead. Was the word *bathroom* impolite? What was proper etiquette when it came to lavatory terminology? *Lavatory!* Maybe he should have said that.

He was so lost in thought that he nearly walked right into Pru as she barreled around the corner.

“ABE,” she said, pulling him aside. “You’ll never guess what I just overheard! I was eavesdropping on a couple of teenagers—”

“You were eavesdropping on teenagers?”

Pru rolled her eyes. “Fine. I wasn’t *actually* eavesdropping. I was just interested in what they were talking about, so I stood someplace where I could be sure to accidentally overhear what they said. Okay?”

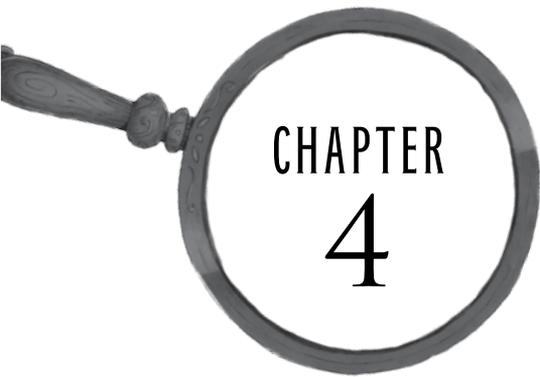
ABE wanted to point out that he hadn’t been objecting to eavesdropping. He’d just been surprised. But Pru seemed excited, so he stayed quiet.

“The point is, one of the teenagers has been working at Winterhaven House this summer. He was

saying how crazy today had been up at the mansion because . . .”

Pru took a deep breath. She gripped his shoulders.

“Because they’re getting ready for Old Man Grimmir’s return tomorrow. ABE, *Odin is coming back!*”



## CHAPTER 4

ABE WOKE UP THE NEXT DAY TO A SKY THE COLOR OF MOURNING. THE BOOK he'd been reading when he fell asleep—a collection of Norse myths—lay closed on his bedside table. He guessed that his mom had placed it there after she came home. She always checked in on him when she worked a late shift.

He dressed and paused outside his parents' room on his way downstairs, wondering if they were up and if he had time to say hi to his mom before going to meet Pru. He was about to knock when he heard his father's voice on the other side of the door.

“It was fine, I guess. A little dull. What can you expect? It's school. But I'll tell you, Maddie, I'm worried

about the boy. Last night, one kid laughed at him and his old teacher called him the wrong name. ABE didn't say or do anything. It's like the kid doesn't even know how to stand up for himself. It was painful to watch."

ABE pulled his hand back from the door. It hung in the air a moment before he lowered it to his side and went downstairs. He'd leave them a note. They were used to him and Pru spending the day together.

As ABE passed the front door, he heard an urgent rapping that announced Pru's early arrival.

"Are you ready?" she asked when he opened the door.

"Just about." He sat on the bottom step of the staircase and wiggled one foot into a sneaker, pulling on the heel flap when it got squished into the shoe. He had new sneakers in a box in his bedroom. But those were for the first day of school. He didn't feel right about wearing them before then.

Pru paced back and forth outside the screen door. She rubbed her hands together with glee.

"Can you believe it, ABE? Odin is here in Middleton again! I wonder what brought him back."

"You don't think he wants the Eye of Odin back, do you? It was his actual eye, after all. Maybe he's mad we hid it."

Pru paused. She chewed her lower lip. It was a new habit. Her hair had grown in the past year. It no longer

fell in a bob around her chin, so it wasn't as easily accessible for chewing.

"No," she said, resuming her pacing. "He went centuries without his eye. I bet he doesn't even miss it anymore. And besides, *we* didn't hide the Eye. Mister Fox did. If Odin wants to be mad at Mister Fox, then that's fine with me. He can get in line."

After a quick dash to grab a granola bar from the kitchen, ABE opened the door to join Pru on the porch. Glancing at the leaden sky, he went back in to grab an umbrella.

"Anything *else* you want to do before we go?" Pru asked.

"Ah, no. I'm good," he said, following Pru as she set off. He tried to match her brisk pace. "Um, Pru, what do you think is going to happen when we get there? I mean, it's exciting that Odin is back. But we don't even know if he'll want to see us."

Pru didn't say anything at first. Instead, she chewed her lip again.

"I know," she said. "But at least his being back is *something*. You know? He *has* to see us."

Pru quickened their pace even more as the sky began a slow leak. ABE opened his umbrella. Around them, tear-shaped drops of rain fell from the clouds above, completing ABE's sense of foreboding about

what they might find when they finally reached Winterhaven House.



They needn't have worried about getting in to see Odin. Two sights greeted them at the mansion's iron gates. The first was a sign announcing that the building and grounds were temporarily closed while the museum underwent renovations.

That might have presented a problem if not for the second sight. A broad-shouldered woman with a long blonde braid stood on the other side of the gate. She appeared to be waiting for them, unbothered by the rain.

"Hilde!" Pru called as she broke into a run.

Odin's assistant reached down and unlocked the gate. She swung it open to admit Pru and ABE.

"Hello, children."

"Hi, Hilde," ABE said, catching up and holding his umbrella up higher to try to cover everyone. "Why are you standing out in the rain?"

"I'm waiting for you, of course." A hint of a smile showed on Hilde's usually stern face.

"Waiting for us?" Pru repeated. "Why? How? Wait! Don't tell me. Is 'Mr. Grimnir' *expecting* us again?"

Hilde's smile slipped from her face as though washed off by the falling rain.

"This is not a time for jokes, children. Come with

me. Odin *is* expecting you. But he does not wait with good news.”

“What’s wrong?” ABE asked.

“That is for Odin to say.”

They walked in silence across the gravel drive and through Winterhaven’s halls, where ABE’s eyes followed the frozen march of the Viking warriors carved into the towering stone walls of the mansion. He watched them disappear down corridors not taken.

Hilde led them to the same room where they’d had their first audience with Odin. It was empty this time, though. Hilde said she would return with “the others” shortly and left them with instructions to wait as she exited through a different door.

Pru threw her arms out wide as soon as Hilde had closed the door behind her. “We’re back!” she exclaimed, clearly not fazed by Hilde’s somber mood.

“Six chairs,” ABE said, walking around the long table that ran the length of the room.

“What?” Pru asked.

“There are six chairs.” ABE gestured to the setup. He recognized one of the chairs, a high-backed and intricately carved wooden seat at the head of the table. It was the chair Odin had sat in on their last visit.

“There’s the two of us plus Odin and Hilde,” Pru said, considering. “That’s four.”

“Hilde said she’d be back with ‘the others.’ I wonder who the last two chairs are for.”

“Maybe Thor’s back, too.”

“Maybe. I kind of hope not, though.”

“What? Are you crazy? Thor’s awesome!”

“No, I know. It’s not that I don’t want to see him. I do. Thor saved our lives. He’s great!”

“Then what’s wrong?”

ABE turned to one of the narrow windows that lined the wall. “It’s the rain. Last night, I noticed that clouds had rolled in. I didn’t think anything of it at first. Then you found out Odin was back.”

“And you wondered if maybe Thor was back, too.” Pru frowned. She’d been practically dancing through the room. Now she slowed down. ABE guessed she was arriving at the same conclusion he’d reached.

“We know that the weather can reflect Thor’s mood, right?” he said. “We got all those clouds last year because Thor was mad about being locked up. But, even with everything that happened then, it never rained. The clouds today remind me of the clouds last time. With the rain, though, and Hilde’s mood . . . everything seems . . . I don’t know. Sad.”

Pru opened her mouth as if to argue. But she closed it again without saying anything and joined ABE at the window. A chill filled the room, despite the fire that

burned in the hearth and the flaming torches that lined the walls.

ABE had wondered about the torches last time. Now, knowing what he did about Mythics and their incompatibility with technology, he supposed that torches made sense for a room where gods gathered and held council.

“What do you think has happened?” Pru asked. She drew her finger across the glass of the window. Beads of moisture gathered on her fingertip.

“I don’t know . . . but I think we might be about to find out,” he said as Thor’s booming voice reached them from behind the door through which Hilde had left.

“And so they must carry the weight of our inaction?” Thor demanded of someone.

The door burst open and the god of thunder stormed into the room. His presence charged the air with a current of anger and tension that raised the hairs on ABE’s arms.

“Thor!” Pru exclaimed, taking a step toward him. She stopped in her tracks as Thor turned his fierce glare in their direction.

Seeing them, the god’s brow smoothed a bit.

“Children, forgive me. Hilde mentioned you had arrived. It is good to see you again.” Thor’s mustache

and beard parted in what looked like an attempt at a smile. He took a deep breath. The atmosphere in the room lightened a little, but Thor's clenched fists and the corded muscles of his arms betrayed his tense emotion.

"What's wrong?" Pru asked.

"A great many things." Thor glanced back at the door. The wood along the upper hinge had splintered, and the door hung limply in its frame. Thor closed his eyes and took another deep breath. "All of which we shall discuss, and soon. First, though, I have yet to greet the brave lad who recovered the Eye of Odin from the field of battle during our last meeting."

Thor approached ABE and gripped his shoulder. ABE's eyes widened and he clenched his jaw shut to keep from crying out. Thor's grip was iron! Why did he even bother carrying a hammer around? His pinkie could probably drive a railroad stake through the ground!

"Yup. He's the brave lad, all right," Pru said, her eyes dancing. Thor's arrival had restored at least some of her good humor. "Did you know his name—*Aloysius*—means 'famous warrior'?"

"A fine name for such a . . . strapping young lad!"

ABE looked down at his scrawny frame. "That's, ah, very nice, sir. But ABE's fine. Really."

"But your true name has such strong meaning, lad!

And it fits someone with the courage to charge into a field of frost giants. You should embrace your fierce nature!”

Pru started nodding vigorously.

“Yes. Yes, ABE, that is exactly what you should be doing. I am *always* telling him to embrace his fierce nature,” she confided to Thor.

ABE cast a sidelong glance at Pru. She responded with a look of innocence. At least ABE assumed she was trying to look innocent. Not having had a lot of practice actually *being* innocent, she wasn’t pulling it off too well.

“Blustering oaf,” a voice muttered, interrupting the exchange.

A bent old man entered the room, carefully navigating through the damaged door. ABE turned to Pru in amazement when he recognized the newcomer. Her dropped jaw reflected the surprise he knew must show on his own face.

Odin, Allfather of the gods of the North, god of wisdom and war, shuffled into the room. He leaned heavily on a long wooden walking stick. A blue cloak lay across his stooped shoulders. Every few steps, Odin reached out with one hand to gather the cloak at his neck as if it were a shawl. The wide, broad-brimmed hat atop his head bobbed up and down as unsteady steps carried him across the room.

“Go, children,” Thor whispered. “Stand behind your seats. Sit after he does. Speak when addressed and do not test my father’s patience. I have already lost my temper with him once this morning and I should not have done so. These are troubled times.”

ABE followed Thor’s directions. Odin hadn’t seemed this weak and old the last time he and Pru saw him. What had happened?

The Allfather made his way to the seat at the head of the table, and Thor moved to stand behind the chair to his father’s right. Hilde returned to the room and stood across from ABE and next to Thor. ABE glanced at the empty seat at the foot of the table.

Odin’s chair slid across the floor and the god dropped into it, muttering. He removed his hat and hung it off the back of his throne-like seat.

ABE, Pru, and the others also sat.

“We are here because of betrayal,” Odin wheezed, looking at everyone around the table. “We are here because of trickery! We are here . . . because of death.”

ABE’s stomach sank with dread.

“My son is dead!” Odin’s declaration came in a hoarse gasp. “Baldur, the best of us, is dead.”

ABE clutched the table to steady himself. The room swayed in the flickering torchlight. Everything seemed suddenly less stable and less sure.

“Oh no!” Pru said. “I’m so sorry.”

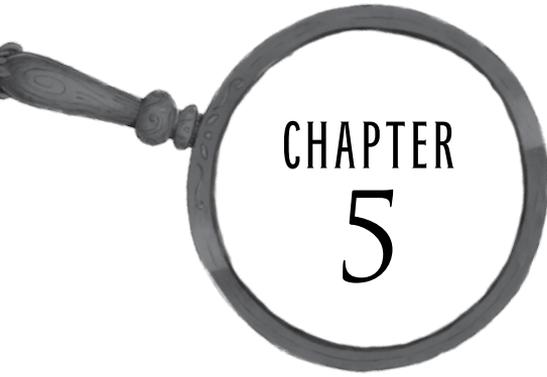
ABE heard empathy in her voice, the empathy of someone who had also lost a loved one. But she didn't really understand. She hadn't read and reread the Norse myths like he had. If she had, she wouldn't be sad.

She'd be terrified.

"That's it, then?" ABE said, forgetting Thor's instructions not to speak. "It's started?"

"What's started?" Pru asked.

"Ragnarok," ABE said, looking at her. "Ragnarok has started, Pru. It's the end of the world."



## CHAPTER 5

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?” PRU DEMANDED OF ABE. SHE TURNED TO Odin. “What’s he talking about? What does he mean, Ragnarok has started?”

“Let your friend tell you,” Odin said. “Like you, he seems unable to hold his tongue, even when instructed to do so.”

ABE flinched at the reprimand, but he didn’t let that stop him from answering. He spoke quickly as his words tried to keep pace with the fear building inside him.

“You know how the Norse myths work,” he began. “Some of them are stories about things that have happened. But because Odin drank from the Well of Wisdom and gained the ability to see the future, some

Norse myths are stories about things that haven't happened yet but will. They're stories that came from what Odin saw in his visions. One of those myths is of Ragnarok, the end of all things."

"I *know* all that. But what makes you think Ragnarok has started?"

"Because Ragnarok doesn't just end in death. It *starts* with death, too. Baldur's death. Loki kills Baldur, the favorite of the gods. Then Loki runs away from Asgard. Thor finds him and brings him back to be judged and imprisoned. Loki eventually breaks free and all the giants join him to fight the gods. And everyone on Asgard and on our world dies in that war. *Everyone!* That's how the stories go."

Pru nodded, her lower lip tucked under her front teeth. "I remember now. But can't we do something? I mean, I knew Ragnarok was coming . . . someday—but not now! Can't we change what's going to happen?"

"The fates hold us tight, child," Thor said. "But—"

"Change what is going to happen?" Odin interrupted. He leaned forward. "We cannot *change* the future. We should not want to! Your clever friend is wrong. Not *everyone* dies. Tell the story true, boy."

ABE frowned. "He's right, I guess. There are supposed to be a *few* survivors among people and gods. But hardly any—"

"Yes," Odin said, interrupting again. "And in time

those survivors will rebuild Asgard and Midgard. But they will make better worlds, untouched by evil. Because through the sacrifice of the gods, all giants and monsters will be destroyed during Ragnarok. Imagine that, boy! A world without evil! It will be a most terrible triumph.”

“Triumph? But so many will die,” Pru said.

“All things die, even gods. What matters is *how* we die. And, more, how we are remembered. The gods of Asgard will not be remembered as cowards who hid from their fate.”

“So there’s nothing we can do?” ABE asked. “No hope?”

“There has never been hope. Only fate and duty and death.”

A long stretch of silence followed Odin’s words, during which the dim stone room felt like a tomb.

A soft rumble in the sky above broke the silence. Thor shifted in his seat.

“My father is right, of course. Our fate is set. And yet . . . while there may not be hope, there may yet be time.”

Odin snorted. Thor did not look in his direction but continued.

“The lad was right in his accounting of events. Loki has killed Baldur and now he has fled. He must be found and imprisoned. Honor and justice demand it. But that

imprisonment will take place in Asgard. Remember that time passes differently there. Loki's imprisonment may last hundreds or thousands of your years."

Thor's words offered a little comfort. But ABE still felt the weight of Ragnarok—of all that death—pressing down on him.

"Listen to Thor, the hero of Asgard," Odin mocked in his withered and withering voice. "He whose mighty hands wield Mjolnir would hide behind the hands of a clock. What does it matter if Ragnarok comes in a day or a thousand days? My son is dead! I will have his killer brought to justice. And you—*all of you*—will help me!"

"Us?" Pru asked.

"Yes. I have seen the moment of Loki's capture. All of you in this room will be present for it. All of you . . . and one other," Odin said a moment before someone knocked.

The sound came from the door through which ABE and Pru had entered (the one still on its hinges).

"Who?" ABE asked, but he was interrupted by the sound of Pru's gasp.

"*I knew it!*" she said.

"Knew what?" ABE looked from Pru to the door as the handle began to turn.

"ABE, think about it! Middleton is filled with Mythics again. That can only mean one thing!"

The door opened and light spilled in, revealing the silhouette of a single figure. As ABE's eyes adjusted to the brightness, he made out the shape of a tall man. The twin peaks of his hat stood up almost like ears, and the tail of his long coat hung below his knees.

“Mister Fox!”

The detective strode into the room. He looked exactly as he had the last time they'd seen him. *Exactly*. ABE wondered if Mister Fox had just the one hat and coat or a bunch of identical ones.

“Sorry to interrupt. I assume my invitation to this little get-together got lost in the mail. Don't worry, it happens. Here's a tip. Use *domovye* for all your future postal needs, especially where invitations are concerned,” Mister Fox said, referring to the Russian household spirits that also lived in the Henhouse. “That's what I do.”

Pru grabbed ABE's sleeve. He didn't need to look at her to know she was smiling. He was, too!

Any misgivings he might have once had about seeing Mister Fox again vanished. Considering what they faced—the literal end of the world—there was no one he would have rather had walk through that door and start rambling. And, boy, was he rambling!

“Of course, you can run into a small problem with *domovye*,” Mister Fox continued. “Every once in a while, your message will end up in someone's shoe.

But that's the *domovye* for you. *Weird* fascination with shoes." Reaching the table and resting his elbows on the back of the empty chair, Mister Fox leaned forward and said, "Hello, Pru. Hi, ABE."

"Hi, Mister Fox," ABE said.

Pru grunted.

ABE looked at her, eyebrows raised.

Oh right.

This was Pru. She wasn't going to let Mister Fox off the hook *that* easily for staying away so long.

"Who is this?" Hilde asked.

"Excellent!" Mister Fox exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "Names. It's usually a good idea to begin with names. That's what I always say. You can avoid so much trouble if you just figure out names right from the start. Isn't that true, Pru?"

"*I'm* not talking to you, Mister Stay-Away-for-a-Whole-Year."

Mister Fox sucked his breath in between his teeth. "Ooh, close. Very close. But, no. It's Mister *Fox* not Mister Stay-Away-for-a-Whole-Year. You were half right, though. Well done, Pru. Excellent memory, almost."

Pru squeaked in protest.

ABE wanted to laugh. Mister Fox was in top form. How was he always so confident? It didn't matter. *He was back*. Just when they needed him most, Mister Fox

was back! If anyone could find Loki and help imprison him in Asgard, Mister Fox could.

“I’d be glad to finish introductions,” Mister Fox said as ABE relaxed into his seat, “but I’m afraid I’m on a tight schedule and can’t stay.”

“*What?*” ABE sat up straight again.

“I’m leaving. And you two are coming with me.”

“We can’t leave,” Pru said. “You don’t understand! Baldur is dead. Ragnarok is coming.”

“I know,” Mister Fox said. He removed his hat and spoke to Odin. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your loss. I truly am. I met Baldur once in my youth. He was kind to me.”

“Then you should want his murderer captured!” Thor said, slapping the table.

“And you’re so sure that’s Loki?” Mister Fox said, turning his gaze on Thor.

Thor froze, stunned. “What?”

“You sound sure that Loki killed Baldur. Why? Did you see him do it?”

Thor’s face turned red and he scratched his beard. “I was, ah, distracted.”

“Very distracted from what I heard. According to my source, the circumstances around Baldur’s death were fairly chaotic. It happened in the middle of a wild celebration.”

Thor said nothing. Instead, he cast a guilty look at

Odin. The Allfather, however, kept his one eye on Mister Fox.

“What ‘source?’” Hilde asked. “How do you know this?”

“Good question,” Mister Fox said. “I like that. Let’s just say a little bird told me. Well . . . a furry little bird. Kind of ratty looking. No wings, but a long, bushy tail and a worrisome penchant for inappropriate language. That kind of little bird.”

“Ratatosk!” ABE said.

“We’ve kept in touch,” Mister Fox agreed with a shrug.

“My father saw my brother’s death!” Thor said, recovering from his embarrassment. “He saw long ago that Loki would kill Baldur.”

Mister Fox stood up straight and slipped his hands into his pockets. “Yes. Your father had a vision of the future. In that vision, Loki kills Baldur. Now, because of that vision, we’re supposed to condemn Loki. But here’s the problem. Nobody saw Loki commit the act in the present. And the last time we crossed paths with him, Loki was trying to get the Eye of Odin so he could see a way to *change* his future. So I have to ask . . . what if Odin’s vision was wrong?”

Thor also stood. A low, threatening peal of thunder rolled outside. “My father’s visions have never been wrong.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

ABE looked from Thor to Mister Fox. What was happening? Why were they arguing? They were supposed to be on the same side!

“You think Loki is *innocent*?” Hilde said, eyes wide with disbelief.

“I don’t know,” Mister Fox said with another shrug. “Not for sure. But that’s the point. None of us know anything for sure. You’re all making assumptions based on a vision. That’s not justice. That’s a witch hunt. I have a particular objection to witch hunts, by the way.”

“This is madness!” Thor roared, banging his fist on the table. “You would stand there and defend Loki when we have all witnessed his mischief and evildoing? He was my friend once. But even I see that time has passed. He must be caught and brought to justice. He *will* be! My father has seen it!”

“Well, good luck with that. We’re leaving. Let’s go, Pru and ABE.”

“You will *not* leave this council!” Thor commanded. Thunder rumbled outside, like a drumroll’s call to battle.

“Sit down, boy,” Odin said, waving Thor back into his seat.

Thor pressed his eyes closed. The cords in his neck tightened as if his head wanted to blast off from his

body and soar into orbit. After a moment, though, he collapsed into his seat, arms folded.

All eyes turned to the Allfather, who had kept otherwise silent through the exchange. Though Odin continued to address his words to Thor, his eye remained fixed on Mister Fox.

“The witch’s foundling’s words do not matter. He is a child who is frightened of his fate and hides in his religion of uncertainty and disbelief. Let him go. Let them all go.”

Odin flicked his hands in a gesture of dismissal.

“But, Father . . .” Thor said.

“Hush, boy. It does not matter. Nothing they do matters.”

ABE rose as Mister Fox jerked his thumb in the direction of the door. Pru followed a moment later after muttering “Sorry” to Thor. It wasn’t until she and ABE had covered half the distance to the exit that Mister Fox also turned to leave. Odin called out to them one last time before they reached the door.

“This changes nothing. You—all of you—will be there at the moment of Loki’s discovery and you will assist in his capture. I have seen it,” Odin said, straining his voice until it broke into either a cough or a laugh, ABE wasn’t sure which. “You cannot change the future!”

“Don’t be so sure,” Mister Fox said, closing the door on the gods.



Pru burst through the front doors of Winterhaven House, leaving ABE and Mister Fox in her wake.

“Is it me or does Pru seem upset about something?” the detective asked ABE in a near whisper.

“Yes, she’s upset about something. And, yes, it’s you.” That was all the warning ABE could give Mister Fox before Pru spun around.

“*Where have you been?*” she demanded.

“I thought you weren’t talking to me?”

“I’m not. I’m yelling at you. It’s completely different.”

“Ah.”

“No, seriously! Where were you? You said we’d see you again.”

“And now you have!” Mister Fox said with a bow and a flourish of his hat. “You see? I always keep my word—eventually.”

Pru muttered something impolite that made it clear she’d spent far too much time in Ratatosk’s company.

Mister Fox relented. “I know I’ve been gone a long time. I’m sorry for that. But it couldn’t be avoided. It’s a big world, and there were other problems that had to be dealt with, other mysteries that had to be solved. My job keeps me hopping.”

ABE laughed.

Pru and Mister Fox turned to him.

“Uh . . . sorry. I thought that was a joke. ‘Hopping?’”

You know, because the Henhouse hops around on a giant chicken foot.”

Pru groaned while Mister Fox grinned at ABE.

“Sorry,” ABE said again. “Yelling makes me a little nervous.”

“Anyway,” Pru continued, “you’ve been gone a year. Then you come back just when things are getting interesting, and you say we can’t be part of the adventure. It’s not fair!”

“I said nothing of the sort. Just because Odin and I don’t see eye to eye—”

ABE gave another nervous laugh, and Pru looked at him with an exasperated expression.

“Eye to eye?” ABE repeated. “Because of the Eye of Odin? Never mind.”

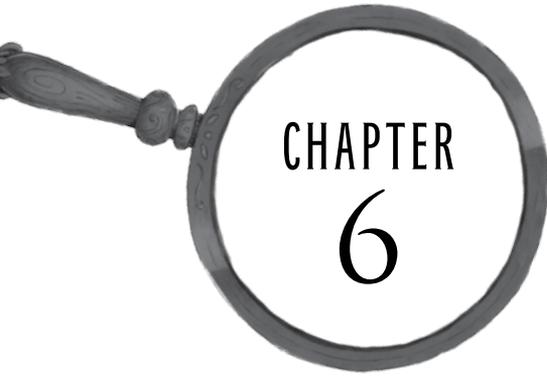
Pru shook her head. “Seriously, ABE. *Timing.*”

“Sorry,” he said. Clearly, Pru didn’t appreciate a good pun.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Fox went on, “just because Odin and I don’t . . . agree . . . on what needs to happen next doesn’t mean there isn’t work for us to do. Let Thor and Hilde try to find and punish Loki. We three have another task.”

“What?” Pru asked.

“Visit me tomorrow at the Henhouse. We’ll discuss it then.”



## CHAPTER 6

LYING IN BED THAT NIGHT, ABE COULDN'T TURN HIS MIND OFF. HE WENT BACK and forth between worrying about Ragnarok and wondering what Mister Fox had planned for them. His thoughts kept him awake late into the night. He'd only just drifted off when a knock woke him.

"Mom?" he mumbled, rolling over.

He sat up when he heard the knock again. He rubbed his eyes. Weird. The sound hadn't come from his bedroom door. Had he dreamt it?

*Knock, knock.*

Pulling his covers up to his chin, ABE swallowed. The sound was *inside* his room. It had come from the foot of his bed.

It was at that unfortunate moment in the darkness

of his bedroom on a cloudy, starless night that a thought occurred to ABE: if Mythics were real, then were monsters under the bed real, too?

And did they knock?

ABE crept to the bottom of his bed and peered over the footboard.

Sitting among a pile of recently finished books was the box shaped like a miniature Henhouse he had received from Mister Fox. It shone with a pale blue glow. The light seeped through the cracks between the house's siding and through the small window above the door.

The knocking came again. It came, without question, from the miniature Henhouse.

“Okay. This is new. You never glowed before. Or knocked. So I should probably open you, right? When a box starts making knocking noises that’s probably what it wants, I guess. Okay. So I’ll open you. Because this isn’t creepy or weird at all.”

ABE lifted the Henhouse onto his bed and reached toward the clasp that held the box shut. It had been designed so that the Henhouse could swing open on hinges along a break that split the front half of the house from the back half, like a dollhouse. His hands paused a moment on the metal. It felt warm. Taking a deep breath, ABE undid the clasp and opened the box.

“ABE! It’s about time! How soundly do you sleep?”

ABE scrambled back in shock, his blankets bunching beneath him.

The looking glass he’d received from Mister Fox hung suspended inside, as expected. Unexpectedly, however, the detective’s face looked up at him from the enchanted mirror. A nimbus of orange light surrounded him.

“*Mister Fox?*”

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“What? No! I wasn’t expecting anyone at all. You can talk to me through this?”

“Yes. It’s a variation on scrying, like I showed you at the Henhouse last year. It’s one of the enchantments worked into the looking glass. Listen, there’s not much time—”

“Does Pru know?”

At the mention of her name, the image of Mister Fox in the looking glass wavered. An image of Pru replaced it.

“ABE! How cool is this? We can talk to each other through these and . . . wait.” Pru covered her mouth with her hands. ABE could tell she was trying (unsuccessfully) to hide a smile. “ABE, are those tie-dyed pajamas?”

“Oh! Ah . . . yeah. Sorry. Um . . . are those unicorns on yours?”

Pru yelled and dove out of sight just as Mister Fox's image reasserted itself.

"We don't have time for this. If I didn't have my hands full right now, we'd be having a very serious conversation about the misuse of magical artifacts. Well, first we'd talk about Pru's surprising fascination with unicorns. But *then* we'd have a serious conversation about artifacts."

"Is something wrong?" ABE asked.

"You could say that. Trolls are attacking Winterhaven House."

Only then did ABE understand the whole meaning of the image in the looking glass. The orange glow behind Mister Fox was not part of the enchantment that allowed them to communicate. It was fire.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course. It's not my time. It's you two I'm worried about. I want you both someplace safe. Go to the Henhouse. I'm on my way, but I don't want you to wait. Pru, you know the way in."

"But what about our parents?" ABE asked.

"Your parents should be fine. In fact, I think they'll be safer without you two there. Trolls are attracted to treasure, especially magical treasure. Your looking glasses are two of the most powerful objects in this town right now. Your families should be safe once you leave. But I've convinced some of the *domovye* to keep

an eye on your houses, just to be sure. The rest will escort you to the cemetery. Now go, and take your looking glasses with you!”

The connection broke, and Mister Fox’s image faded from the glass.

ABE leapt off his bed and dressed. He grabbed his phone just as it rang.

“You’re there!” Pru’s relief was clear. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I was about to leave. I’ll see you at the Henhouse?”

“Let’s meet at the Earth Center. It’s on the way for both of us. We can go to the Henhouse together from there.”

“Good idea,” ABE said before hanging up. He hadn’t liked the idea of walking to the cemetery alone.

Looking glass in hand, ABE grabbed his windbreaker from his closet and slipped downstairs. Goose bumps rose on the back of his neck as he stepped out into the night air. He zipped up his jacket. At the end of his walkway, he hesitated, still anxious about his parents’ safety.

Mister Fox had said he’d send *domovye*. But they were mostly invisible. ABE wondered how he would know when they got there. Should he wait?

He caught himself shifting his weight from foot to foot and forced himself to stop. Instead, he tightened

his grip on his looking glass. The familiar polished wood of the handle comforted him. He had never admitted it to Pru, but he felt like a wizard whenever he held it.

The looking glass, of course!

Kicking himself for not thinking of it right away, ABE lifted the glass to his eye and peered through the magnifying side. After all, the *domovye* were household spirits. That made them Mythics. They should be visible through the enchanted glass.

Light flared as ABE looked through the device and dozens of figures appeared, lit by the golden glow that surrounded Mythics when viewed through the glass.

ABE had read about *domovye* after meeting Mister Fox, so he was somewhat prepared for their bizarre appearance. Despite being called spirits, there was nothing ghostlike about the creatures around him. They looked like small men (just a little taller than ABE) with thick walrus moustaches that blended into even thicker gray beards.

ABE had learned that *domovye* often adopted the look of the master or mistress of their house. Sure enough, the *domovye* all wore the same coat and hat that Mister Fox wore—only their clothing was almost cartoonishly big. The oversized brims of their hats and their buttoned coats and upturned collars hid most of their bodies.

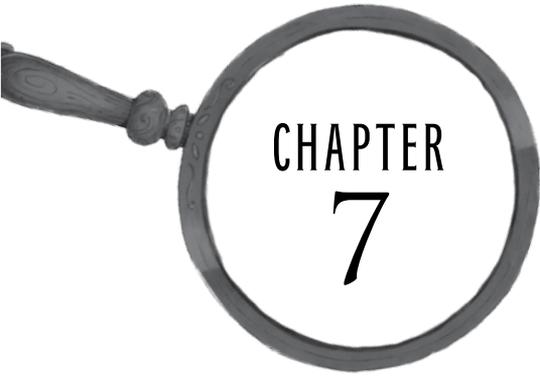
The *domovye* avoided open spaces. They crouched in patches of darkness between buildings and seemed to have a fondness for climbing. ABE saw one *domovoi* scale the side of a house to perch beside a chimney. It moved with the skill of a jungle ape. Another one had crouched beneath a tree close to ABE. He approached it.

“So . . . you guys will stay and watch over my mom and dad?” he asked.

The figure nodded.

“Okay. Thanks.”

ABE took one last look at his house before hurrying off to meet Pru, a dozen *domovye* following closely behind. He tried very hard not to think about the trolls out there, somewhere in the night.



## CHAPTER 7

ABE WAS GLAD FOR THE COMPANY OF THE *DOMOVYE* AS HE MADE HIS WAY through the deserted streets of Middleton. The night seemed particularly quiet. Granted, he was not used to walking the town's streets in the hours after midnight. But he had expected to see *some* signs of life. An occasional car. A light in a window.

Instead, Middleton appeared deserted.

*A ghost town.*

ABE smiled despite his discomfort as the phrase sprang to mind. After all, his companions were actual spirits—in name, anyway. He lifted his looking glass to his eye to reassure himself that the *domovye* were still there.

Strange. Were there fewer of them than the last time he'd checked?

He hurried on.

He found Pru waiting for him at the Earth Center. It was weird being there with her again. They had both avoided the place for months after their adventure with the Eye of Odin. It had reminded them too much of Loki. But ABE believed in the center's environmental mission, so he had gone back to volunteering after a while. Pru had stayed away.

"It's about time," Pru said as ABE approached.

"Sorry. I wanted to make sure the *domovye* showed up before I left my parents alone."

"Are they cool, or what?" A quick smile lit Pru's face. "I'd only seen their hands before. The way they look and move—it's like someone crossed Mister Fox and a monkey!"

"That's a mental image that will stick with me."

"Glad I could help." Pru's shoulders relaxed a little. "I'm glad you're here. It was creepy waiting by myself. Come on. Let's go."

They set off for Main Street, which ran all the way from Winterhaven House through town and down to the cemetery. They'd only traveled a couple of blocks when Pru paused. She held her looking glass to her eye.

"ABE, I thought you said you waited for the *domovye* before you left your house."

“I did.”

“Didn’t any come with you?”

“Yeah. About a dozen. Why?”

“That’s not possible. I had about that many with me, too. But now I can only see a handful.”

“What?” ABE lifted his own glass. He counted six, maybe seven, *domovye* in the area. What had happened to the rest?

“ABE,” Pru hissed. “Look!”

ABE turned in the direction she pointed. The looking glass framed a shadow in the distance. His stomach lurched as the enchanted lens zoomed in on the shadow. It magnified and sharpened the image in the glass.

A troll!

ABE shuddered. Trolls were *awful* looking. They were worse than giants. Giants at least looked like people (even if they were really big). Trolls were something else. The brute before them had two heads—*two heads!*—and at least four arms. Though not as tall as a giant, the troll still stood a couple of feet taller than the biggest person ABE had ever met. Hair (or was it fur?) covered its massively wide chest and a loincloth hung from its waist.

As ABE watched, two *domovye* launched themselves at the troll. The creature howled and reached for a nearby stop sign. It tore the sign—and a good

bit of sidewalk—from the ground with a shrug of its massive shoulders. Swinging the makeshift club, it struck one of its attackers and sent it tumbling hat over coattail across the ground. As it rolled, the *domovoi* grew increasingly less solid until it vanished from sight completely.

“Did that *domovoi* just die?” Pru said. “*Can domovye die?*”

“I don’t know. But we sure can! Come on, let’s get to the Henhouse!”

Pru nodded. ABE took one last glance at the troll through the looking glass. The remaining *domovye* had taken their fallen companion’s place and were swarming the beast.

“ABE, come on!”

He forced himself to look away and followed Pru. They turned onto Main Street, and ABE wondered how much time the remaining *domovye* could buy them.

A popping sound behind him soon offered the first hint.

“The streetlights are going out!” Pru said. “Why?”

“The troll must have defeated the *domovye*,” ABE said, struggling to keep up with Pru. “Mister Fox said Mythics and technology don’t mix. I think the troll is chasing us and the lights are going out as he passes them!”

He looked back—and immediately wished he

hadn't. The troll was using its multiple arms as additional legs and was closing in on them fast!

Beside ABE, Pru stopped short.

"What's wrong?" he asked, turning back to tug on her arm. "We have to go!"

"No," Pru said, standing up straight. "We can't keep running."

"Yes, we can! It's easy. I'll show you!"

"We won't make it, ABE. The troll is too fast. Besides, we're Fibbers! These looking glasses can send the troll back to wherever it comes from, right? So let's send it on its way."

ABE stared at her. She was serious. And insane.

And kind of amazing.

"I think this is a terrible idea," he said, moving to stand beside her.

"You think *all* my ideas are terrible," she said. He knew she was trying to sound brave, but her voice shook.

The troll had slowed when its prey stopped moving, perhaps sensing a trap. Or maybe it was just stunned by what it considered to be a truly astounding display of stupidity. It stood in the middle of Main Street, about a dozen yards away. The Laundromat was to its left, and the barbershop ABE went to get his hair cut was on its right. He would *never* look at those places the same way again.

Assuming he and Pru survived.

The troll snorted. It resumed its bizarre loping movement—slowly at first, but it soon picked up speed.

Pru raised her arm and pointed the looking glass toward the troll.

The troll continued to move closer. ABE felt the muscles of his neck tighten. Why hadn't it vanished? How close did it need to be?

“Pru . . . it's not working!”

“It *has* to work!” She wiggled her looking glass the way one might shake a TV remote with failing batteries.

The troll leapt at them with all four arms outstretched.

“ABE, run!” Pru shouted.

Pru dodged to the right as ABE dodged left.

One of the troll's heads turned to follow ABE's movement, and the other followed Pru. Its attention split, the troll landed clumsily on the ground and tumbled over itself, its limbs instantly entangled. Pru ducked into a narrow alley as ABE scrambled to hide behind the florist's delivery van, parked on the side of the road.

He peeked around the back of the van just in time to see the troll stand back up and, after a moment of indecision, chase after Pru.

He had to do something! But what? Their looking glasses hadn't worked.

Well, Pru's hadn't. He hadn't tried his. But why would his work if Pru's didn't?

The troll reached the opening of the alley, but its massive frame proved too wide for the narrow space. Luckily, the creature seemed too dumb to try to turn sideways. Apparently, two heads *weren't* better than one.

ABE groaned. Pru was right. He really needed to work on the appropriateness of his timing with puns.

Wait! Two heads!

The troll had two heads. The looking glasses worked by magnifying a Mythic's sense that it didn't belong on Earth. But maybe to work, *both* of the troll's heads would have to look into the enchanted mirrors. Two heads probably meant two brains.

He peeked at the troll again. It tore at the brickwork at the mouth of the alley with terrifying efficiency. Chunks of masonry and dust flew from its four jackhammer-like hands as it beat at the opening of Pru's safe haven.

The troll still hadn't tried turning sideways.

Two *very small* brains, ABE decided. But his idea still made sense.

He rounded the van and tiptoed into the street. Somehow, he had to get Pru's attention without letting the troll see him. He had to be as quiet as a—

*Clank!*

ABE froze as the metallic clang filled the air. He looked at his feet. A steel road plate lay on the ground beneath him. The road crew that had put it

there (probably to cover an area of construction) must have placed it poorly, because it had shifted under the weight of ABE's step and banged against the concrete.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, ABE looked up just in time to see one of the troll's heads turn toward him. A large blob of drool pooled on the beast's lower lip as it curled in a snarl. The drop fell, and before it could even hit the ground, the troll lunged in ABE's direction. ABE retreated until his back pressed against the florist's van.

"Hey, ugly!" Pru called, stepping out from the alley. "Leave him alone!"

One of the troll's heads stayed oriented on ABE while the other head turned toward Pru. Torn by conflicting desires, the troll stalled in the middle of the street.

"Pru!" ABE called. "Two heads! I think we both have to use our looking glasses!"

"Right!" she agreed as the troll howled in frustration. The muscles in its legs coiled, signaling that it was ready to pounce.

ABE lifted his looking glass at the same moment Pru did. There was a flash of light. When it faded, the troll had vanished into a cloud of shimmering gold sparks.

ABE and Pru lowered their glasses. Walking slowly, they met in the middle of the street. They stopped in

the exact spot where the troll had stood, moments before.

ABE couldn't believe it. The plan had worked.

"We're safe," he said. Relief spread over him in a wave of soothing warmth.

That's when a truck screeched around the corner and, catching their startled faces in its high beams, barreled directly at them.

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