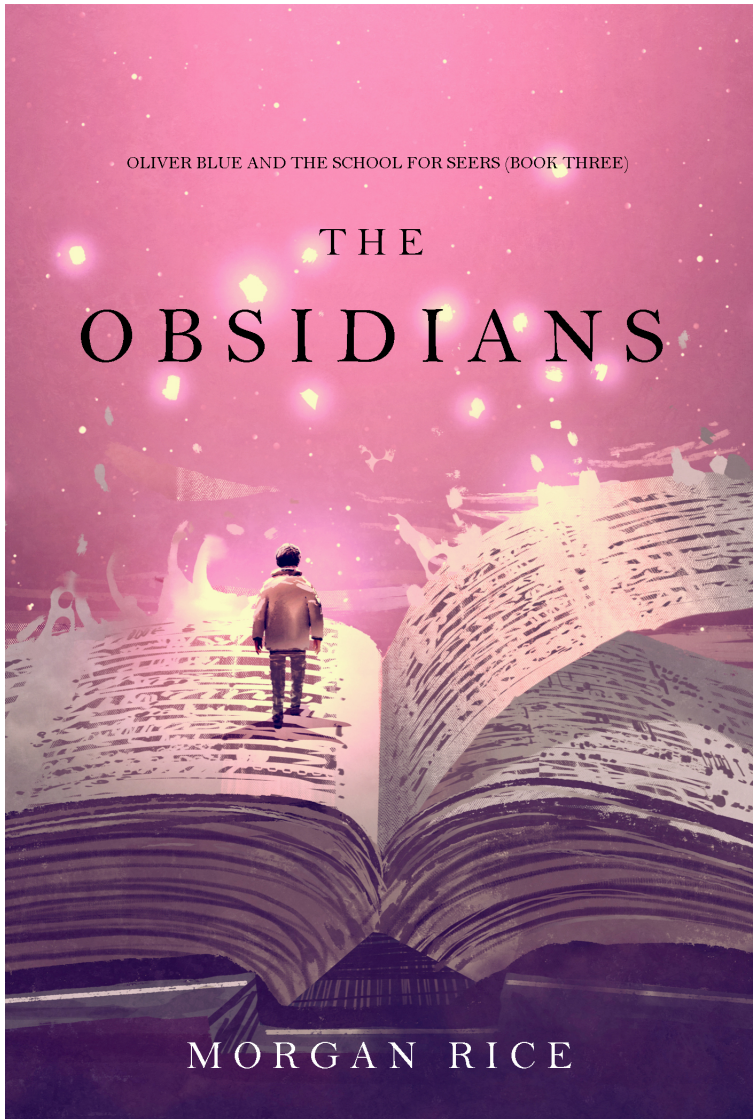


OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK THREE)

THE OBSIDIANS

MORGAN RICE



Морган Райс
The Obsidians
Серия «Oliver Blue and the
School for Seers», книга 3

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=42400564
The Obsidians (Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book Three):
ISBN 9781640296688*

Аннотация

“A powerful opener to a series [that] will produce a combination of feisty protagonists and challenging circumstances to thoroughly involve not just young adults, but adult fantasy fans who seek epic stories fueled by powerful friendships and adversaries.”

—Midwest Book Review (Diane Donovan) (re A Throne for Sisters)

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This time, it is to the Italy of the 1400s, to visit two very important people: Leonardo Da Vinci, and his rival, Michelangelo. Only Leonardo's inventions hold the answer; and only Michelangelo's paintings hold the key.

The Obsidians, though, are bent on revenge, and Chris is determined to not stop until his little brother is done.

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Book #4 in the series will be available soon!

“The beginnings of something remarkable are there.”

—San Francisco Book Review (re A Quest of Heroes)

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Morgan Rice

The Obsidians (Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book Three)

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series A THRONE FOR SISTERS, comprising eight books; of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES, comprising four books; of the new fantasy series OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS, comprising four books (and counting); and of the fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL, comprising three books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print

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Roberto Mattos

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

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CHAPTER ONE

Oliver felt his pulse beat urgently through his body. Esther Valentini was dying. Every second that passed was a second wasted. He had to save her, no matter what. He loved her too much to give up on her. Whatever perils he must face to save her, he would. No matter how slim his chance was at success, he had to take it.

He peered across the coffee table at Professor Amethyst, who sat on a battered leather couch drinking tea from a delicate china cup. The headmaster at the School for Seers had given Oliver permission to embark on a very dangerous journey back in time to find a hidden seer invention that may just save Esther's life. But now Oliver needed the exact details of how to accomplish such a mission.

"I'll do whatever it takes," Oliver reminded him once more, his voice strong and determined. "No matter how dangerous, I will save Esther."

The headmaster of the School for Seers nodded slowly. "It's my duty as your mentor to tell you it will be a perilous ordeal. One you may very well fail."

"Any chance is better than no chance," Oliver said firmly.

Professor Amethyst placed his teacup down. It tinkled, the noise echoing out through the expanse of his office in the sixth dimension.

“To save Esther’s life,” he said, “you must travel back in time and find something called the Elixir. It is the only thing that can cure her.”

The Elixir, Oliver repeated in his mind, feeling awestruck. It sounded very important.

“The Elixir has been hidden,” the headmaster continued, “because it is very powerful. And very dangerous.”

“Where has it been hidden, Professor?” Oliver asked.

“No one knows. That is a tightly guarded secret.”

Oliver felt his chest sink. How would he find the Elixir if it was hidden? If no one knew where?

Just then, he noticed a small sparkle in the headmaster’s eyes, one that told him all hope was not lost.

“But I believe I’ve worked out a way to find the hidden location,” the old seer told him.

Hope soared in Oliver’s chest. “You have?”

“Don’t get too excited,” the professor said, tempering Oliver’s sudden buoyancy. “I know of a portal and it *may* be able to take you there.”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked, feeling perplexed. Portals linked two places together by creating magical wormholes that weaved through space and time. Surely the portal the professor talked of would either lead Oliver there or it would not.

The headmaster cleared his throat and began to explain. “This is no ordinary portal. It is a very special one imbued with rare magic. It can take you exactly where you need to go.”

Oliver's heart leapt. That sounded perfect! But then why was Professor Amethyst's expression so grave?

The old seer continued. "In order to make it work, you must hold the intention in your mind when you enter, that you are going to the right place for the highest good. Otherwise it will become extremely unstable and eject you."

Oliver's throat became as dry as sand. Now he understood. If he entered the portal without a pure heart, he would certainly fail.

"It will only work if my intentions are true?" he asked.

"Yes," the professor replied with a solemn nod. "If your intentions are not pure, you will be expelled into the vacuum of space. Do you understand now how risky this is?"

Oliver felt trembles peel through his body like mini earthquakes. He was scared about the portal, about whether it would find his intentions good enough. But he had to try. For Esther. His mind was made up.

Oliver tipped his chin up bravely. "I'm ready."

Professor Amethyst looked at him long and hard. Then he stood. "Come with me."

Oliver did as he was told, feeling his nerves spike tenfold as he followed the headmaster out of the sixth dimension and back into the busy School for Seers. They stood at the very highest floor, peering down at the central atrium and all fifty floors of crisscrossing walkways filled with students, all the way down to the kapoc tree.

"This is all thanks to you, Oliver," Professor Amethyst

said. "Because of your heroic actions, your willingness to put everything above yourself, the Orb of Kandra has been returned. The school is stronger now than ever before."

Oliver felt a blush in his cheeks. Why was the professor showing him this?

"It is *that* purity of heart that you need to take on this next journey," the professor explained. His eyes sparked with intensity.

Oliver nodded. He understood. The professor wanted him to feel—really, truly feel—what he needed to, to pass through the portal; to remind him exactly what was at stake and where his heart lay.

But Oliver didn't fully agree with what the professor had just told him. He had not succeeded in his prior mission alone. He'd had his friends. Without them reminding him what mattered, he would never have succeeded in the last mission to save Sir Isaac Newton and rescue the Orb of Kandra.

"I didn't do it alone," Oliver told the professor, a little tentatively.

To Oliver's surprise, the headmaster's face burst into a wide smile.

"Exactly!" He clicked his fingers, like he'd just won a competition. "That is exactly why I have arranged for you to embark on this mission with others."

Oliver's eyes widened with shock. "You have? Who?"

He'd been accompanied by Esther on his last mission, and she

now lay dying in the medical wing. Ralph had come to support him as well and almost drowned in the River Thames for his troubles. Taking people back in time was very dangerous. Oliver hated the thought of putting any of his other friends in harm's way.

Oliver heard the ding of the elevator from the other end of the corridor. He looked over as the doors opened.

His heart soared as he recognized who was emerging. It was Hazel Kerr, her butterscotch-colored hair twisted into a bun on the top of her head, and Walter Stroud, wearing a vintage computer game tee, the bright yellow color complementing his dark skin. They were two of his closest friends. The thought of them accompanying him on this mission was very comforting.

But as his two close friends walked toward him, Oliver noticed a third person coming through the doors. This person was unfamiliar to Oliver. He was a tall boy with tan skin and dark wavy hair that fell to his chin.

"Who is that?" Oliver asked the professor.

"I'll allow him to introduce himself," the headmaster replied.

The three students reached Oliver. Hazel gave him her customary shoulder bump. Walter slapped him on the back, as he often did. Oliver nodded to them both, grateful to have them by his side. But his gaze was drawn to the third student, the one he did not know.

"I'm David Mendoza," the boy said, offering his hand for Oliver to shake. "I'm a second year."

“Oh,” Oliver replied, shaking his hand. “You’re coming with me?”

The professor spoke up. “David is highly trained in combat. The best in the school. I want you to have some protection on your journey. Think of him as the brawn to Miss Kerr’s brain and Mr. Stroud’s heart. With these three companions alongside you, you will have the best chance at success.”

Oliver nodded. He trusted Professor Amethyst—his mentor had not let him down yet—but he didn’t know David Mendoza at all. He didn’t know if he could trust him.

“Here are some things you will need,” the professor continued. He produced an amulet from his pocket. “This is a sephora amulet. You can use it to check in on Esther. It will show her to you.”

He handed it to Oliver.

Frowning, Oliver peered at the strange black jewel. He could just make out the beautiful face of Esther Valentini shining on its surface, as if drawn with charcoal. Her eyes were closed and she looked gravely ill. Oliver’s heart ached at the sight of her.

“Is this real time?” Oliver asked.

The headmaster nodded. “Yes. It will help you keep your heart pure. If you ever find yourself wavering, look into the amulet and remember why you are on your journey.”

Oliver slipped the precious amulet over his neck. He would treasure it, his link back to Esther.

Next, Professor Amethyst handed him a bejeweled scepter.

Oliver looked at it with awe. It had a hollow inner tube through which sand flowed, and no matter how many times Oliver turned the scepter, the sand continued to flow in the same direction and at the same speed, like it had been enchanted.

“What is this?” Oliver asked.

“When you strike the scepter it will create a brilliant light that causes temporary blindness. So use it wisely. The sand inside shows you how long Esther has left to live.”

Oliver gasped, horror taking hold of him. A sick feeling raced through him as he watched the sand flow.

The headmaster took him by the shoulders, breaking through his thoughts. “This is about more than Esther,” he explained. “She is fated to die. You will be changing fate to save her. As you well know, that will have a knock-on effect. There will be other changes we cannot foresee. But I have looked through many timelines and if Esther dies, the outcome will be worse.”

Oliver’s stomach dropped. “What do you mean?”

“Her life is tied to the school, Oliver. Her death will have a ripple effect throughout time. But I cannot say anything more specific than that. You know I cannot divulge what I’ve seen of the alternate timelines.”

Oliver understood. But it caused him great anxiety to think that there was more at stake here than just Esther. The school was also, in some way, in peril.

He looked again at the sand timer within the scepter. Every second that passed allowed another grain of sand to slide through.

“Likewise, so will her survival,” the professor continued. “The Elixir will not only cure Esther, but it will enable all seers to travel to difficult moments in time and return safely, to accomplish urgent missions as necessary. That sort of unlimited time travel is risky. So you see now, Oliver, why this is so important.”

Oliver felt his nerves rising through his throat, making it tighten as if squeezed by a boa constrictor. There was so much more at stake than he’d ever realized.

He looked at Walter and Hazel, his best friends, and then at David, his new companion. Finally, he looked to Professor Amethyst.

“I won’t let you down,” he said.

Professor Amethyst nodded with finality. He clapped him on his shoulder. “Then perhaps now it is time to say goodbye.”

Oliver nodded. “Yes. But first, I need to see Esther.”

“Of course.”

The professor led Oliver to the elevator and they rode it to the hospital wing. As they entered, Oliver scanned the ward for Esther. When he found her, he noticed a hunched figure beside her. His chest tensed. It was Edmund.

Edmund turned sharply as Oliver approached. He glared then leapt to his feet, furious.

“What is he doing here?” Edmund demanded of the headmaster, pointing an accusatory finger at Oliver. “He’s the reason Esther’s in this state.”

His words sent a bolt of grief through Oliver. It was true.

Esther contracting time travel sickness in the first place was all his fault.

But Professor Amethyst shook his head. “Esther knew she was dying before she even left for England,” he told Edmund. “Oliver had nothing to do with it.”

Oliver couldn’t bring himself to believe the professor. Esther had told him as much herself, but he still felt that they were just lying to make him feel better and not blame himself. How else could Esther have contracted time travel sickness if not from her journey back in time with him? Nothing else added up.

As Edmund stood there fuming, Oliver noticed that his hands were pulled into fists. He knew that Edmund loved Esther, too. It must have been easier for him to blame someone for her predicament, especially if that someone was Oliver, whom he already hated.

“I don’t believe you,” Edmund shot back. “She was fine before she went on that mission with Oliver. Now she’s like this.” He threw his arm out to where Esther lay very still, her eyes shut. “And yet you still trust Oliver to save her life?”

His eyes flashed with anger.

Oliver couldn’t quite believe that Edmund was speaking to Professor Amethyst that way. This was their revered headmaster, and Edmund was arguing with him like a child with their parents!

But what was even more surprising was the way Professor Amethyst allowed him to. Any other student, in any other circumstance, would surely be punished for behaving in such a

rude and angry manner. It only served to drive home to Oliver just how uniquely desperate Esther's situation currently was.

Professor Amethyst regarded Edmund calmly. "Oliver's heart is pure," he explained. "His feelings toward Esther are pure. Yours, I'm afraid, Edmund, are not."

Edmund's face flushed red. "How dare you say that? I love her, too! I loved her long before *he* even set foot in the school! I could do this mission just as well as Oliver. Better, even."

But the headmaster just shook his head. "I'm sorry, but that is not true. There is only one person who stands a chance of succeeding. And that is Oliver."

Edmund stood there a moment longer, looking furiously from the headmaster to Oliver. Then he stamped his foot and stormed away, shoving Oliver with his shoulder as he went. The sound of stifled sobs filled the hospital wing as he hurried away.

Oliver watched him go. He couldn't help but feel bad for Edmund. He'd be crushed too if Esther had not reciprocated his affection.

With Edmund gone, Oliver turned his attention to Esther's sleeping form. He crouched down beside her and took her hand in his. Her skin felt cold, as if she weren't able to generate enough body heat. He squeezed it.

To Oliver's surprise, he felt her squeeze back. Oliver held his breath. She was waking up!

At that moment, Esther's eyelids began to flutter. A small moan escaped her throat.

“I’m here,” Oliver murmured. “Esther?”

Beneath her lids, Oliver could see her eyes moving. She was clearly trying very hard to open them.

Then finally, as if it took her a great effort, her eyelids opened and Oliver found himself gazing into her beautiful emerald green eyes.

She regarded him silently. The smallest of smiles tugged at the corner of her lips. Then, with a sigh, her eyelids dropped again. She’d fallen back to sleep.

“I won’t let you down, Esther,” Oliver whispered, feeling his voice warble with emotion. “I won’t let you die.”

CHAPTER TWO

Christopher Blue sat soaked and shivering in Mistress Obsidian's black-walled office. His dark blond hair clung to his head in wet tendrils. He'd brought the smell of the River Thames with him and the whole room stank because of it.

All the other Obsidians sat around the table with downcast expressions, arms folded, glaring at him. Malcolm Malice had the meanest glare of all, the kind of look that could turn you to stone.

Malcolm clearly blamed Chris for their failure back in the year 1690.

With a painful stab of frustration, Chris recalled the moment he'd almost killed Oliver on the banks of the River Thames. He'd had his hand around his ankle and all he had to do was drag him down into the depths of the water! But somehow his brother had just managed to slip from his grasp and slither through the portal.

The door burst open, tearing Chris out of his ruminations. Mistress Obsidian waltzed in, her black cloak flaring out behind her.

Chris watched her with cautious apprehension as she sank heavily into her seat and glanced into each pair of eyes with a piercing glare. The tension in the room grew with every second of silence.

Finally, she spoke. "You've let me down."

Her gaze roved to Chris. He sat up taller, straighter, and sucked in his cheeks. He braced himself for her scolding.

But to his surprise, she looked past him and focused instead on Malcolm.

“You most of all, Malcolm Malice.” Her tone was ice cold.

“Me?” Malcolm exclaimed. He threw an arm out at Chris. “*He* was the one who let Oliver escape with the Orb of Kandra! If anyone’s to blame, it’s him. He was our leader.”

“You were supposed to lead,” Mistress Obsidian shot back.

“You said the strongest should lead,” Malcolm protested.

Mistress Obsidian slammed her hands onto the table to shut him up. “You should have been the strongest, Malcolm! You! A trained seer! Christopher had only just been imbued with his powers, yet after only a few hours, his strength surpassed yours!”

Chris felt his chest swell with pride. He’d always suspected he was special. The look of embarrassment on Malcolm’s face was something he’d cherish forever.

But suddenly, Mistress Obsidian turned to look at him. “You can wipe that smirk off your face, Christopher Blue,” she barked. “There’s more in store for you.”

Chris felt his pulse spike with anxiety. He quickly rearranged his features into a neutral expression.

“Yes ma’am,” he squeaked, his mind reeling through all the possible punishments she was certain to mete out.

Mistress Obsidian pinned him to his seat with her cold, mean stare, and continued in the same firm tone. “I’ve imbued you with

the most powerful dark magic. You have a lot of potential. But you need to be trained.”

Chris blinked with shock. All around him, he heard the sound of the other Obsidian students shuffling in their seats. Mistress Obsidian’s words had taken them all by surprise.

“Trained?” Malcolm spat. “What about punished?”

Mistress Obsidian ignored his outburst. Her eyes remained on Chris.

“Trained?” Chris repeated.

“Yes. Properly. Your powers are too much for any of the teachers at Obsidian’s to handle.”

The headmistress snapped her fingers and the door behind her flew open. A man walked into the office. He was dressed in a long black robe that covered the entirety of his face as well as his whole body. The only things showing were his brilliant blue eyes, the bright blue eyes of a rogue seer.

“This is your new trainer,” Mistress Obsidian told Chris. “Colonel Cain.”

Chris recognized the man instantly. He was one of the fighters from the dark army who’d fought against Sister Judith alongside him in 1690s England.

His heart began to pound. He felt dizzy with emotion. Seconds ago he’d been expecting a harsh punishment but now he was discovering instead that he would be trained by a soldier from the dark army! It was quite a shift for his mind to make.

Despite his best attempts to maintain a blank expression,

Christopher felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. When he'd been back in 1690s England, fighting alongside the dark army, he'd felt a pull toward them, a sort of calling telling him that he belonged with the army far more than the Obsidian school. Now his wish was coming true.

"It will be extremely hard," Mistress Obsidian barked, forcing his attention back to her and out of his head.

Chris gave a series of hurried nods and spoke in a quick voice. "I understand. I'll work hard for you, ma'am."

The headmistress paused, her lips pursed into a thin line as she regarded him for a couple of beats.

Chris felt his insides squirm. Mistress Obsidian had that effect on most people. Oddly enough, his fear of her just added to his admiration and desire to please her.

"You'd better," she said finally, settling back into her throne. "Because there will be no third chance."

The words struck Chris like a lightning bolt. He didn't need Mistress Obsidian to explain what that meant. He'd failed once. This was his final chance to prove himself to her. If he failed again, it was over.

Out the corner of Chris's eye, he could see that Mistress Obsidian's warning—no, *threat*—had turned Malcolm Malice's glower into a delighted, evil smile. The sight of his stupid face made determination swell in Chris's gut.

"I won't let you down," Chris said forcefully, his attention directed at Mistress Obsidian like a dart to a bull's-eye.

“Whatever it takes. Wherever you send me. Whoever you need me to kill. I will do it.”

Mistress Obsidian tipped her chin up, her gaze locked on his. Chris noticed the spark behind her eyes that told him she believed in him.

The tension in his chest released. He slumped a little in his chair, exhausted by the stress of it all but relieved to know she had faith in him. Her approval meant everything to Chris.

“Good,” Mistress Obsidian said with a sharp nod. “Because there’s no time to waste.”

She leaned forward on her elbows and waved her arm over the vision bowl on the table before her. It was her spying device, the one she used to watch their rivals at the Amethyst School for Seers. Usually there was an image inside, but this time there was nothing but a smudgy blur, like a dark storm cloud.

“Since your failed escapades back in 1690s England, the Amethyst School for Seers has been fortified even more,” she explained. “I can no longer see inside. But don’t worry. We have people working for us on the inside.”

“Do you mean a mole?” Madeleine, the ginger-haired seer, asked.

It was the first time any of the Obsidian students besides Malcolm or Chris had dared to speak.

Mistress Obsidian looked at her and smiled. “Yes.”

Madeleine looked delighted. She clapped her hands. “How exciting. Who is it? A student? A teach—”

But before Madeleine could finish her sentence, Mistress Obsidian waved her hand in the air to mime a zipping motion. In the blink of an eye, Madeleine's lips disappeared, leaving nothing but a fleshy covering where her mouth used to be.

Chris flinched in his seat. The sight of Madeleine with no mouth disturbed him. But what disturbed him even more was *why* Mistress Obsidian had decided to show off her powers in that way. It was a warning, Chris realized. A warning for him. This, or something similar, was the fate that awaited him if he screwed up the mission.

Madeleine's eyes were wide with alarm as she pressed her hands to her mouth. Her voice was now nothing more than a muffled noise.

"Does anyone else feel like interrupting?" Mistress Obsidian asked, her glare roving across them all.

Everyone remained silent.

The headmistress carried on as if nothing had happened. "The fortifications that obscure my ability to see only cover the school grounds. Which means the second Oliver Blue steps outside the boundary of the school, I will be able to track him again."

At the sound of his brother's name, Chris sat up a little taller in his seat. His desire to kill that pipsqueak once and for all grew even stronger inside of him, building to a murderous fever pitch that pounded in his ears like a tribal drum.

"And the second he does," Mistress Obsidian continued, her voice sounding sly, "I'll be sending *you* after him."

She slammed her fist onto the tabletop and everyone jumped. But her gaze was fixed only on Christopher's.

He gulped as the intensity in her eyes burned into him.

Her voice became louder, sterner, more enthused. "This time, we won't fail. We cannot fail." Her eyes sparkled with malice. She drew herself up to her feet and waved a fist in the air. "This time, we will kill Oliver Blue."

CHAPTER THREE

Leaving the School for Seers was always difficult for Oliver. Not just because it involved leaving behind the friends and teachers he adored, but because the school was situated in 1944, right in the middle of the war, and that meant leaving it was always perilous.

Beside him, Oliver heard Hazel whistle. He looked over at her to see her gazing around at the row of noisy factories all constructing things for the war effort. Their tall chimneys spewed smoke into the air. Steel fire escapes zigzagged across their exteriors. Large posters adorned each building, urging men to join the war against the backdrop of American flags. Distinctive black cars that looked like they were straight out of a gangster movie chugged by.

“I forgot what the world outside the School for Seers looked like,” Hazel said. “It’s been so long.”

Like the rest of the students, Hazel had abandoned her old life in order to train to become a seer, to partake in important time travel missions to keep history in order. This was her very first mission. Oliver could understand why she looked so overwhelmed.

Walter drew up to their sides, standing on the sidewalk as the traffic buzzed by.

“Where to now?” he asked.

David also came up beside them. He was holding the scepter; Oliver thought it made the most sense for the fighter amongst them to keep hold of the weapon. He could see the sand shifting within the hollow tube inside of it. It sent a jolt of panic into him to know that time was passing them by.

“We must find the portal,” Oliver said with urgency.

Quickly, he pulled his compass from his pocket. The special device had been given to him by his guide, Armando. It had once belonged to his parents. Along with a notebook of his father’s old lecture notes, it was the only link to them he owned. It had helped him on a previous mission and Oliver was certain it would help him now. Though he’d never met them, Oliver felt like his parents were always guiding him.

The symbols, when interpreted correctly, showed him the future. He could use it to guide them to the portal.

He looked down at the compass. The main dial, the thickest of them all, pointed directly at the symbol of a door.

That was simple enough to understand, Oliver thought. Their quest was to find the portal and that was certainly represented by the door symbol.

But as he peered at the other gold dials, each one pointing at a symbol that looked like Egyptian hieroglyphics, it became a little harder to work out the meaning the compass was attempting to show him. One image looked like a cog. Another appeared to be an owl. A third symbol was easily identifiable as a dog. But what did they all mean?

“A cog. An owl. A dog...” Oliver mused allowed. Then suddenly it hit him. As it dawned on him where he was being directed, he gasped. “The factory!”

If he'd read the compass correctly, it was directing him to a place all too familiar to Oliver. Armando Illstrom's factory, Illstrom's Inventions.

The factory wasn't too far from here. The cog could represent the machine he worked on, the owl because of the flying mechanical birds that nestled in its rafters, and the dog could represent Horatio, the old inventor's trusty bloodhound.

Oliver wasn't sure if he was correct in his interpretation but it certainly seemed plausible that the portal may be somewhere within the factory's grounds. He couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of seeing his old hero again. It felt like a very long time to Oliver since he'd last set foot inside the magic factory.

“This way,” he told the others, pointing in the direction he knew the factory to be.

They began to walk, passing row after row of war-era munitions factories. Workers in brown and beige jumpsuits filed in and out of the heavy steel doors, including many women. Every time a door opened, the sounds of saws and drills and heavy machinery would increase.

“I hope Esther isn't in too much pain,” Hazel said as they went. Just the mention of her name sent bolts of anguish into Oliver's stomach.

“She's being taken care of,” Walter replied. “The hospital at

the School for Seers is the best in the universe.”

David drew up beside Oliver. He was at least a head taller than Oliver and he'd pulled his chin-length black hair back into a small ponytail. With his all-black attire and the scepter slung across his back, he looked a bit like a ninja.

“Why are you on this mission with me?” Oliver asked him.

He realized as soon as he'd said it that his tone had been quite blunt. He hadn't meant it that way, he was just confused. Bringing a stranger on the mission added a whole other level of uncertainty.

David looked across at him, his expression neutral. He held himself with a serious air. “Didn't Professor Amethyst explain it to you?”

Oliver shook his head. “Not really. He just said you were a good fighter.”

David nodded slowly. His face remained expressionless, in a way that reminded Oliver of a trained soldier. “I've been sent along as your personal bodyguard.”

Oliver gulped. Bodyguard? He knew going on time travel missions was perilous but having a bodyguard seemed a little over the top.

“Why do I need a bodyguard?” he asked.

David's lips pursed. “I haven't been told all the details. But Professor Amethyst was quite clear about my brief for this mission. Keep you alive. Do everything and anything necessary.”

His explanation brought little comfort to Oliver. Professor

Amethyst had never deemed him in need of extra protection before, so why now? What was so dangerous about this mission in particular?

Still, who was he to question the way the headmaster operated? Professor Amethyst was the most powerful seer of them all, centuries old, and had seen many timelines play out. He knew what was for the best. If the strangely militaristic David Mendoza was part of that, then Oliver just had to accept it.

As they strode through the streets, Oliver's attention was drawn over and over to the hollow tube inside the scepter. The sand had already noticeably shifted, indicating that time was already sifting away. The thought of Esther's time running out sent a jolt of pain stabbing his heart.

There was no time to waste. He had to reach the portal.
He hurried his pace.

The sky was starting to darken when they reached the road upon which the factory was located. But before Oliver had a chance to stroll straight to it, Hazel stopped him with a gentle hand to his upper arm.

"What is it?" he asked.

Hazel pointed to the compass in Oliver's hands. "The dials on the compass, they all suddenly changed."

Frowning, Oliver pulled the compass up to his face to get a better reading.

Everyone crowded in to look as well. Several of the dials had changed positions, though the main dial itself remained pointed

resolutely at the door.

“It’s still leading us to the portal,” Oliver explained. “But it seems to want us to go some other way now.”

He squinted, trying to decipher the symbols and what they were now showing him.

“I don’t get it,” he muttered with frustration. “Now it’s pointing at a tree, a brick wall, a key, and...” He tipped the compass upside down to try to make sense of the final symbol. “... a fire hydrant?”

“Oh,” Hazel’s voice came. “You mean like them?”

Oliver’s head rose immediately to see Hazel pointing across the street. Sure enough, there stood a fire hydrant in front of a large oak tree. A little behind them was a tall, red brick wall. Set into the wall was an old wooden door with a large, rusty keyhole.

Oliver’s breath hitched. The compass must have directed him toward the factory in order to get him to this specific spot.

“Do you think the door is the portal?” Hazel asked.

Oliver put the compass back into his pocket. “There’s only one way to find out.”

He led the others across the street to the door. They gazed up at it. It looked completely normal. No signs of it being a portal at all.

Walter tried the handle. “It’s locked.”

A bolt of inspiration struck Oliver then. He recalled the key symbol on the compass. He crouched down, positioning his eye to the keyhole to look through.

A purple and black vortex swirled on the other side, with bright white forks of lightning zapping across its surface.

Shocked, Oliver gasped and flinched back so violently he fell right onto his backside.

“What did you see?” Hazel asked, grabbing his arm to break his fall.

David grasped hold of his other arm just as quickly.

“A portal...” Oliver stammered. “That’s the portal.”

As David and Hazel helped Oliver to his feet, Walter rushed excitedly over to the keyhole and looked inside. When he turned back to face them, his face was in a wide grin.

“That is wild!” he exclaimed.

He was always the most enthusiastic of Oliver’s friends, though he was also prone to fits of ill temper. Hazel was the smart one. She’d helped Oliver defuse Lucas’s atomic bomb.

Hazel hurried to look through the keyhole next. But when she turned, her expression was quite different from Walter’s. “That looks kind of terrifying.”

Oliver nodded slowly. He felt the same way as Hazel. The swirling purple lights and the long, endless tunnel he’d seen through the keyhole were beyond intimidating. The thought of stepping in there terrified him. He’d been through enough of them now to know how peculiar and unpleasant it felt to travel through a portal. But he knew he had no choice. He had to be brave for Esther and for the school.

“So, how do we get inside?” David asked, rattling the handle.

Unlike the others, he didn't seem interested in peeking through the hole at the portal.

"I need pure intentions," Oliver explained. "Then it will connect me to wherever it is I need to go." He looked at his friends standing behind him. "Then you all follow."

Oliver knew there was one way to ensure his intentions were pure. He looked in the sephora amulet.

On the surface of the shiny black onyx gemstone, he could see that Esther was sleeping. She was as pretty as ever. But she looked troubled, as if she were enduring a terrible pain.

Oliver's heart lurched. He had to save her.

"I'm ready," he said.

He grabbed the handle and turned. But the door was stuck.

"It didn't work!" Oliver said.

His chest heaved. Were his intentions not pure enough after all? Doubt began to take hold of him. Maybe Professor Amethyst had made a mistake sending him on this mission. Maybe he didn't have a pure enough heart after all.

"Let me try," Hazel said. "Esther's my friend, too."

She, too, rattled the handle. But it just would not open.

Walter tried next. He, too, failed.

Oliver's stomach dropped to his feet. They couldn't fall at the first hurdle! And the ticking clock in the hollow tube of the scepter was a constant reminder that Esther's time was finite, that they were in a race to save her. They had to hurry.

Just then, David stepped forward. Oliver knew that David,

who had no intentions toward Esther at all, having never even met her, couldn't possibly be the one to open the door to the portal. But they were out of options and so he may as well try.

David looked contemplative as he studied the wooden door in front of him, quirking his head left and right. Then he took a couple of steps back, planted his feet firmly to the ground, and kicked the door heavily with the sole of his boot. He used the strength of a kickboxer.

To everyone's surprise, the door flew open.

The portal swirled ahead of them, a huge, roaring beast like a violent churning whirlpool. Oliver gasped as a huge gust of wind seemed to try to suck him inside.

But even with access now, he couldn't shake the feeling of being a failure. Why hadn't the door opened for him? Why David?

He looked over, hair flying in his face, at the boy Professor Amethyst had sent on this mission with him.

"Why did it work for you?" Oliver asked over the roaring wind.

"Because," David called back, "I figured if the portal only takes you to where you need to go with pure intentions, perhaps the portal door only opens to someone with the pure intention to unlock it. You're all focused on Esther, on the destination. My focus, though, is to help you in whatever way I must. So my pure intention was to open the door for you."

His words struck Oliver deeply. So David's sole intention on

this mission was to help him? His ability to open the door to the portal had proven his loyalty. That's why Professor Amethyst had sent him.

"Now it's your turn, Oliver," Hazel said. "Your turn to show your true intentions."

Oliver understood. Motivation zapped in his veins as he grabbed the amulet again and focused on Esther sleeping inside. His heart lurched.

The wind swirled.

He looked back at his friends. "Here goes nothing."

They jumped.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chris stood on the soggy field in the shadow of the Obsidian School for Seers. He was covered in mud, all the way up to his waist. Rain lashed down on him.

“Again,” Colonel Cain demanded. His eerie blue eyes flashed.

Chris gritted his teeth. He was exhausted. He’d been running laps around the field for what felt like hours. But then he remembered his mission—to kill Oliver—and his motivation returned.

His grueling combat training had started immediately. And while Chris was thrilled on one hand to be the only seer in existence to possess the power of dark matter, the early morning drills were grinding him down.

Chris had always been a chunky kid—he preferred snacks to sports—and all the hours of running in the mud and rain while having orders barked in his face was wearing him down. And yet despite all the hardships, his motivation only grew stronger. He would kill Oliver. Next mission, he would not let him slip away.

He began to run again, his chest heaving. He had a sharp stitch in his side but he ignored it and carried on. Out the corner of his eye he could see Colonel Cain watching on, his blue eyes glowing even through the driving rain.

Just then, Chris caught sight of a figure standing in one of the dormitory windows of Obsidian’s. He knew immediately it would

be Malcolm Malice. He smirked, filled with pride that Malcolm was watching him. He knew Malcolm was jealous of his powers and of the special attention he was being shown. Malcolm would have loved to have been trained by the dark army. He was still bitter about their failed mission and falling from grace in Mistress Obsidian's eyes.

As he ran, slipping and sliding in the muddy grass, Chris recalled again that moment on the banks of the River Thames where his hand had been clasped around Oliver's ankle one moment, then suddenly he'd lost hold and Oliver had disappeared through the portal. Chris was determined not to let that happen again. Next time he came face to face with Oliver, he'd end him. Then he'd get all the glory from all the Obsidians, and Malcolm Malice would have none.

The sky was turning dark, Chris noticed. He rounded the corner and began racing back toward Colonel Cain. He'd been training since dawn, not even stopping for lunch. The colonel was like a drill sergeant. But no matter how hard he was worked, Chris never complained. Even now, with his breath coming in sharp, rasping wheezes, he would not let the man see his pain on his face. Colonel Cain was tough, yes, but he was admirable. Chris looked up to him in a way he never had his own father.

He made it back to Colonel Cain. Through the man's dark robe, Chris could see him peering down with the unearthly bright blue eyes of a rogue seer.

Colonel Cain pressed the button on the top of his stopwatch.

“How did I do?” Chris asked.

“You’re getting slower,” came the colonel’s response, in an imposing, booming voice.

“I’m hungry,” Chris replied, putting his hands on his fleshy hips. “When are we stopping to eat?”

The colonel’s glowing blue eyes narrowed to slits. He looked furious.

“You have the power of dark matter inside of you, Christopher,” he snapped. “You should need for nothing. The power Mistress Obsidian gifted you with is the envy of every dark soldier in the universe.”

Between the hunger pangs, Chris felt a swell of pride.

“Come here,” Colonel Cain said, gesturing to Chris.

Chris approached cautiously, sliding a little on the muddy earth.

“Hold up your palms,” the colonel said.

Chris did as he was instructed.

“Do you know the power you hold within these?” the colonel asked.

Chris nodded. “I can spray acid out of them,” he said with pride, recalling how he’d destroyed Newton’s precious artworks back in 1690s England.

“You can do much more than that,” the colonel said.

He took hold of Chris’s hands by the wrists. His firm was grip. His fingers were like talons, knobby and long, almost inhuman.

“Focus your mind,” the colonel demanded. “Access your dark

powers. Then use that power to melt through the fabric of dimensions.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chris murmured.

“I don’t kid,” the colonel replied.

Chris had learned about the dimensional fabric when Mistress Obsidian had called on the dark army to aid them on the last mission. She’d used a fancy knife to do it. But Chris was expected to do it just with his hands?

The colonel was staring at him insistently. Chris took a deep breath and allowed his mind to find that meditative place where reality began to blur.

Any time he reached his powers was exciting for Chris, because every time he found them inside himself he could tell they had grown. His powers sat like a huge smoldering volcanic rock, right in the center of his gut. Even from just the short time he’d been training with the colonel he could feel how much bigger they were, how much more they wished to be utilized. It was like they were something foreign to him, an alien that resided within his body, one that gave him the sort of power that people only dreamed of.

He reached into himself and began to pull his powers up and out through his arms. He felt the heat trickling along his outstretched forearms and into his wrists, which Colonel Cain was still gripping tightly. Then he felt it seep into his palms, heating up his skin to a searing temperature. Finally, he pushed out, projecting the image he’d created in his mind of the fabric

melting and forcing it into a reality.

As he did, he noticed the atmosphere around his hands begin to change. It started shimmering.

"It's working..." Chris stammered.

He looked up at Colonel Cain. Though the man's hood cast shadow over his features, Chris could tell from his eyes that he was now smiling devilishly.

Chris felt his heart begin to slam in his chest.

"I'm doing it," he said, feeling a great surge of triumph.

"Now, let go," the colonel instructed.

Chris dropped his hands. In the place where his palms had met the fabric of the dimension, there were now two singed holes.

"Awesome," Chris murmured.

"That is how you access the space between time," the colonel said. "The void. The realm where the dark army resides." He reached forward and began to press the singed parts of the sky back together again. "You see now how precious the power you contain within you is?"

Chris nodded. "I do."

"Good. Then run."

Chris felt a hitch in his chest. Run? Again?

Colonel Cain's moment of niceness faded. His voice became cold and hard again. "I said run."

Chris wasn't going to argue. He pounded off again, to make yet another lap around the field.

This time when he looked up at the dormitory window, he saw

that Malcolm had now gone.

As he rounded the corner, catching sight of the silhouette of Colonel Cain in the distance, Chris realized his mentor was no longer alone. There was a second figure beside him. Someone smaller. A student, Chris realized.

As he drew closer still, it dawned on him. Malcolm, having watched Chris training from the window of the dormitory, had now come down to the playing fields.

Chris clenched his jaw. He didn't want Malcolm interacting with Colonel Cain. The colonel was *his* mentor!

His pace grew even faster, until the pain in his side felt like a knife blade. His lungs ached but he pushed himself on and on and on.

At last, he thundered up to the colonel, kicking mud all over Malcolm's pant legs.

Colonel Cain looked surprised. He stopped his stopwatch.

"That was your fastest lap yet, Christopher," he said, with the smallest hint of pride in his voice. He looked at Malcolm, then back to Chris. "I guess a little bit of competition is good for you."

Chris took a huge breath, his lungs hurting as he did.

"Competition?" he stammered. "What do you mean?"

But Colonel Cain had clearly gotten an idea. "Malcolm was telling me about your last mission. He's volunteered to join you on your next one. I was going to say no. But now that I've seen how much faster you can be with a competitor to beat, I've decided to send him too."

“No!” Chris shouted. The last thing he wanted was Malcolm stealing his glory, taking his spotlight. “I’m the only one Mistress Obsidian trusts with this. Malcolm already failed. It’s my turn to lead.”

But the colonel wasn’t listening. He’d walked over to the side of the field where he’d laid out some sparring equipment and boxing gloves. He picked up a pair of red gloves.

“Here,” he said, offering them to Chris. He handed another to Malcolm. “Let’s see how you two get on in a duel.”

Chris couldn’t believe this. This was supposed to be his time to shine! Now Malcolm had muscled his way into it. The stupid weasel had been half the problem last mission. Bringing him along to this one was a terrible idea! He’d have to knock him out and concuss him so badly there was no way he could come along too.

Glowering at Malcolm, Chris affixed his gloves. The cold rain pounded down but he could hardly feel it anymore. All his attention was on Malcolm. On kicking his butt.

Malcolm got his gloves on and punched them both together in a menacing way. He smiled his horrible, weaselly smile. Chris narrowed his eyes even more.

“Last man standing,” Colonel Cain announced. “Go!”

Malcolm wasted no time. He barreled toward Chris like he’d been waiting for this chance his whole life.

Chris took up his defensive stance. He could use Malcolm’s passion against him. The kid was rage-filled, not thinking. All

Chris had to do was let him wear himself out before taking a well-aimed blow.

Malcolm threw a punch. Chris pulled his arms up, blocking it easily. It had been a sloppy first attempt.

Malcolm tried again, attempting a quick left hook. But Chris had already anticipated it. He blocked again. This time, he retaliated with a blow to Malcolm's exposed side.

"Oof!" Malcolm gasped as he staggered.

The mud was slippery and he stumbled. Chris quickly realized he had an opportunity here. He'd been training in the slippery mud for hours and was more steady on his feet, but Malcolm had not and he was barely able to keep himself up.

Chris knew he had to take this moment while Malcolm's defense was down.

He took two large steps forward and focused on Malcolm's exposed shoulder, than put the full bulk of his bodyweight into plowing his right fist toward it.

But Malcolm suddenly righted himself, and at the last second he ducked. Instead of thumping his shoulder, Chris's hand soared past it, bringing his entire body with it.

He staggered. He'd made a huge mistake. A miscalculation.

A sudden sharp blow struck him across the back of his right ear. Pain exploded across his jaw, neck, and cheek. His ears began to ring.

Disoriented, Chris swirled around, trying to get an eye on Malcolm. But Malcolm must've darted around behind him

because all Chris could see was the muddy field and pounding rain.

Drops got into his eyes, making it even harder to see. Then he felt another horrible blow slam into the back of his head. This one was so hard his teeth rattled. Black stars danced in his eyes.

He started lashing out, desperately trying to find Malcolm, to get any single one of his blows to connect. But he failed. He was just flailing. Shame overcame him.

A third blow came. This one got him in the throat. The pain was so awful that Chris felt his eyes fill with tears.

Gasping, he fell to his knees onto the soggy earth. Then he flopped sideways, no longer able to hold his body up, his body overcome with wracking coughs. His face slammed into the ground. As he panted for breath, he tasted mud.

Malcolm's feet appeared beside him. As he looked up at his figure framed by raindrops, the boy smiled devilishly.

Then Colonel Cain stepped up and peered down at Christopher.

"Yes," Colonel Cain said, nodding his head. "I think you two will make quite the team."

CHAPTER FIVE

Oliver felt the strange tugging sensation on his body of the portal pulling him through. No matter how many portals he went through, he'd never get used to the feeling. It felt like having his atoms ripped apart and rescrambled.

The flashing purple lights of the portal whizzed past him, blindingly bright and adding to his general discomfort. He felt nausea swirl in his stomach.

Oliver couldn't help but feel for his friends. Neither Walter nor Hazel had ever traveled through a portal before, and this one was particularly brutal, especially considering there was no guarantee they'd even make it out the other end. He could only pray that he'd be able to safely lead them to their desired destination. But if his intentions had not been pure enough, they'd all be ejected into space. The thought was just too terrible to consider.

After what felt like hours, Oliver heard a strange sucking noise, like water draining through a plug hole. Then with a *pop* like a bursting balloon, all the flashing lights and tugging sensations disappeared.

Oliver felt himself fly through the air as if catapulted. He landed hard on the ground and groaned from the pain.

Three distinct thudding noises came from behind him and Oliver knew that was the sound of each one of his companions landing.

He looked back. They all looked stunned and disheveled. David's ponytail had come undone during the journey, and Hazel's bun looked messy and askew. Once again, Walter was the most unfazed. He leapt up and punched the air.

"That was awesome!"

Oliver quickly scrambled to his feet. "Shh!" he said, running toward Walter. "We don't know where we are. Don't draw so much attention to us!"

He reached Walter at the same time as Hazel and David.

"Which begs the question," Hazel said. "Where are we?"

Everyone began to glance around. They were surrounded by a series of buildings that appeared to be in various states of disrepair. They'd clearly once been extremely ornate and extravagant churches, with stone steps, tall white columns, and domed roofs, but something had ravished them. Time? War? It looked possible even that the building materials had been scavenged. Overall, they all looked close to collapse.

The streets were also filthy. Wild livestock roamed around, dropping dung behind them, and several foxes darted in and out of the churches.

Oliver shuddered. "Somewhere in Europe. But where and when precisely, I've not idea. Let's look for clues."

They began to pace the streets. There were no cars, but plenty of horse manure, which helped them narrow down the era to prior the invention of the automobile. There were very few people scattered around the place, mainly beggars, which made

the place feel a bit like a ghost town.

"I feel like the population must have shrunk recently," Hazel said. "There seem to be far too few people for all these buildings."

"So we're perhaps in some kind of old city that's lost its people for some reason," Oliver suggested. "That would explain why the buildings look so dilapidated."

"Look there!" Hazel said, pointing at a rectangular area surrounded by large, important-looking buildings. "That looks like a Roman forum. Only it's filled with cattle and markets." Her eyes widened with excitement. "I think we might be in Rome. Right at the cusp of the Renaissance."

"The what?" Walter asked.

"The moment in Europe that marks the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity," she replied with enthusiasm. "Where art and architecture and philosophy and trade flourished. You know, the age of discovery?"

Walter let out a mocking laugh. "You're such a nerd."

But Hazel was on a roll. She completely ignored Walter, looking increasingly excited. "That's why all the buildings are falling down. The economy collapsed in the fourteenth century because of war and plague, as well as famine from a small ice age. The population shrank by somewhere between twenty-five and fifty percent."

"So it must be early fifteen hundreds," Oliver replied.

"I think so," Hazel said with a nod.

Just then, a pair of women walked past them chatting. Oliver didn't understand the language. But David was listening intently, as though perhaps he did.

Oliver raised his eyebrows at David expectantly. "Well? Did you understand them?"

David nodded slowly. "Yes. I can speak several languages. Perhaps that's another reason Professor Amethyst sent me."

"And?" Oliver asked. "Are we right? Are we in Italy?"

David nodded. "We're in Italy."

Oliver couldn't help but exclaim, "Italy!"

Hazel, too, seemed completely enthralled by where they'd ended up. "Rome! During the Renaissance!"

Walter whirled and craned his head up to take in the sight of the tall, crumbling churches. "I'm glad you two are so happy about where we ended up. I'm just glad we're not dead."

"So, the portal took us to sixteenth-century Italy," Hazel said, still looking awed despite her attempt to get back to business. "Why would the cure for Esther be *here*?"

At the mention of Esther's name, Oliver felt his stomach twist. There was no time to be entranced by the surroundings, to marvel at having landed in sixteenth-century Italy, because every second that passed was a second wasted.

"We need to work out where to go next," he said hurriedly.

Oliver pulled out his compass. But to his surprise, while the main golden dial was pointing at a vial—which surely represented medicine—all the other smaller dials were pointing

at the same symbol. It was giving him no other clues.

Oliver's shoulders slumped. He felt defeated.

"It-it's not working," he stammered, helplessly.

Now what? They were back in Renaissance Rome with no idea where to go or what to do next! Every moment they stood there dithering was another moment Esther came toward death.

"Uhhh... Oliver..." David said in a warning voice.

Oliver peeled his eyes away from the useless compass. To his surprise, there was a young boy running toward them. He looked desperately concerned.

Oliver felt dread rise through him. Who was the boy and why was he homing in on them like that, with a look of pure anxiety?

He ran up to them and began to speak in urgent, rapid Italian. Oliver looked helplessly to Hazel and Walter, who looked just as clueless as he must have.

David took the lead. He stepped forward and nodded along as the boy spoke.

When the tanned-skinned boy finally finished, David looked over his shoulder at Oliver.

"He's a seer," he said.

Oliver's eyebrows pinged up his forehead. "A seer? How did he find us?"

"He says that when we activated the portal it sent a beacon alarm to his school. He says we must follow him. It's too dangerous here."

"But why?" Hazel asked. "What's dangerous about standing

innocently in the streets?”

“Beyond the roaming livestock and beggars, you mean,” Walter quipped.

David translated her question to the boy. He shook his head, seemingly growing more and more exasperated. He spoke in a quick, exaggerated manner, throwing his arms around theatrically.

“Well?” Oliver asked, growing increasingly anxious with every second that passed.

“The beacon,” David gasped, relaying the message back to the others. He locked eyes with Oliver, his expression now deeply troubled. “It doesn’t just send an alarm to the school. The alarm can be picked up by all seers.”

Hazel gasped. “You mean...”

“Rogues,” David finished for her. “We’ve sent out a signal to them that we’re here.”

Oliver felt the warmth drain from his face. Finally he understood why the Italian seer boy was so frantic. They’d practically sent out a signal for any rogue seer to come along and mess up history!

“Quick,” Oliver told his friends. “Let’s get out of here.”

Hazel grabbed his arm. “Are you sure we can trust this boy?”

“He risked a lot just to come here and get us,” Walter said.

But Oliver wasn’t so sure.

“David, can you ask him more about himself? Find out if there’s any way to prove what he’s telling us?” he asked.

David looked back to the boy and asked him something in Italian. “His name is Gianni,” he relayed to the others. “He said he can prove that he’s trustworthy.”

The boy, Gianni, took a step forward and pulled from his pocket a bronze key. He held it out to Oliver, nudging it into his hand.

Wondering why Gianni seemed to want him to have it, Oliver took the key, frowning, and turned it in his hands. Then he understood.

There on the back was a familiar symbol. A ring with three evenly spaced eyes. The symbol of the School for Seers.

Oliver felt a smile tug at his lips. That symbol felt like home to him.

He showed it to the others. Walter nodded, satisfied, but Hazel folded her arms.

“I still don’t know,” she said.

Her skepticism reminded Oliver of how he’d felt toward David. But David had proved himself back at the portal and he now trusted David fully. His bodyguard would not lead them into danger.

“If David says we can trust Gianni, then I think we can trust him,” he told her.

A look of pride flashed across David’s features. “I promise you, Hazel. Gianni is exactly who he says he is. A seer. A friend sent to get us.”

Hazel chewed her lip as if deliberating. But finally she nodded.

“I supposed statistically speaking we’re more likely to get caught by rogue seers if we stand here than if we go with him. So I’m in.”

Walter rolled his eyes. “Trust Hazel to make a decision based on statistics!”

Guided by Gianni, the seer boy from Renaissance-era Rome, the friends began to run.

CHAPTER SIX

Mistress Obsidian sat in her office, staring into the vision bowl. She'd been keeping a near-constant vigil over it, ignoring all signs of fatigue inside her that demanded she sleep, all signs of hunger telling her to eat. Nothing was more important to her than finding Oliver Blue and destroying him once and for all.

But the weariness was becoming hard to fight. She'd lost track of the days. Two? Possibly three? Her life had become staring obsessively into the vision bowl, listening to the constant shouts of Colonel Cain from outside her window as he trained Christopher Blue in the dark arts.

The thought made a smile twitch across her lips. There was no chance of failure this time. Christopher had the most dangerous magic inside of him. Along with the best training the dark army could offer and Chris's unparalleled murderous desire to kill Oliver, this time they would succeed.

She just wished their mole would hurry up. What use was it sneaking a spy into the Amethyst School for Seers, to set the trap that would lure Oliver out, if they were going to take so long enact the plan?

She may have to conjure up another, one that would speed things along a little. Perhaps she could find someone within the school to manipulate. Throw in a little bit of time travel for fun. In fact, the more she thought of it, the more she realized

just how enjoyable it would be. There had to be a student inside the School for Seers who was feeling dissatisfied. Molding an impressionable young mind—just as she had with Malcolm Malice, and now with Christopher Blue—was one of her favorite things to do.

Yes, she would dupe one of the students into doing her bidding.

No sooner had she decided on the new plan, than something in her vision bowl flickered.

Mistress Obsidian jerked up, straight-backed, and leaned closer to the bowl. Through the dark storm clouds that had obscured her view for days, she now saw a shimmering purple light, swirling.

She knew at once what she was looking at. It was a portal. Oliver Blue was on the move.

Excitement crackled through her veins. She watched intently as the image cleared even more. Then her heart jumped in her chest.

There he was! Oliver Blue!

He was standing on a very ornate street. Mistress Obsidian frowned, trying to place the architecture.

“Rome?” she muttered under her breath. “Fifteen hundreds?”

She watched on, revulsion swirling in the pit of her stomach, as Oliver and his pesky little friends all gathered around. Then she noticed another boy hurrying them through the streets.

The group reached a brick wall and the boy pressed a sequence

of bricks. The wall hinged open.

Mistress Obsidian knew immediately what was happening. The other boy was a local seer and he was leading Oliver Blue into the safety of his own school! The second they were inside, she'd no longer be able to see him!

Frustration overcame her. She slammed her fists onto the tabletop as fury overwhelmed her. A growl of anger came from her chest.

"No matter where he goes, that pipsqueak always manages to get help!" she cried angrily.

Fuming, she paced over to the window and gripped the sill. She would not endure another three days staring into the vision bowl. She'd seen enough to work out that Oliver Blue was in 1500s Rome. He already had a head start. And support. There was no time to waste.

She threw open the window, ignoring the driving rain that pelted her.

"It's time!" she roared into the black sky.

Her voice, magnified, boomed through the evening like a peeling bell.

She thundered back to the table and slunk down into her throne. A moment later, she heard the door open. In came Colonel Cain, Christopher Blue, and Malcolm Malice, responding to her summoning. They looked like drowned rats, covered in mud, their cheeks bright red with exertion. It was satisfying to see them that way.

“Sit,” she told them all brusquely.

They did as she commanded. Absolute obedience was Mistress Obsidian’s favorite thing.

“I’ve tracked Oliver Blue,” she announced. “There is no time to waste. You must travel to him immediately.”

Christopher’s face was aghast. “But I’ve been training since sunrise. It’s almost midnight. I’m exhausted.”

Mistress Obsidian felt irritation crackle through her. They were always so whiny, these students. She gave them the best education, the darkest powers, every chance to thrive and succeed and take over the universe, and all they ever did was complain.

“I have sat here for three days waiting for this signal,” Mistress Obsidian told him. “When you’ve done the same, *then* you can talk to me about being tired.”

She paused. On reflection, maybe Christopher had a point. Sending two tired seers on this task was a fool’s errand. They’d need support, at least until they’d rested and rejuvenated their powers.

“You can each take another with you,” she said. “Lookouts who can watch over you when you need to sleep. But you must decide quickly. Who will you take?”

“Natasha Armstrong,” Malcolm said without missing a beat.

“A good choice,” Mistress Obsidian replied. Natasha was one of the students who attended her gifted and talented class. She would make a fine addition to the mission. “Christopher?”

Chris floundered. “I don’t know anyone. I’ve never had a chance to make any friends here.”

“Then take someone you met from your last mission,” Mistress Obsidian told him impatiently, trying to hurry him along. “Whoever you felt helped you the most.”

“Madeleine,” Christopher said, shrugging.

Mistress Obsidian scoffed. “Madeleine? The carrot top whose mouth I zipped shut the other day? Very well. It’s your choice.”

She tapped into her seer powers, searching within herself for the surge of energy she needed to move atoms. She knew every nook and cranny of her precious school, and it was easy for her mind to latch on to the exact locations where Madeleine and Natasha were sleeping. This would be quite a rude awakening for them.

Using all her glorious talent, Mistress Obsidian grabbed hold of their atoms and moved them, tugging them all the way into her office. She rearranged them again, until the two girls materialized in front of her.

They both blinked, looking startled, their cheeks flushing red as they realized they were standing in their nightgowns in the middle of the head teacher’s office.

“Madeleine. Natasha,” Mistress Obsidian announced, “today is your lucky day. Today, you are going on a very important mission, one that will result in the annihilation of Amethyst’s once and for all. Today, you are going to Rome. Today you will kill Oliver Blue.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gianni, the Italian seer, led the four friends through the enchanted brick wall. As they emerged through the veil and out the other side, Oliver gasped at the sight that awaited him.

He'd never seen anything quite like it. The Italian version of the School for Seers was the most extravagant-looking place he'd ever seen. Unlike Sister Judith's school in England, which had had the vibe of a monastery, and his own school in the U.S, which at times felt like a futuristic spaceship, this one had the vibe of a royal palace. He was half expecting to see a king waltz through the huge doors, or a row of bugle players to announce their arrival.

"This way," David said, relaying back to them what Gianni was saying.

They hurried inside the huge school. Here, the opulence only increased. There were columns of marble and statues all over the place, not to mention an intricately painted domed ceiling. It made Oliver think of all the Renaissance-era artists, like da Vinci and especially Michelangelo, who painted huge murals on the ceilings of religious buildings. He wondered whether a few had visited the school.

As they hurried along the corridors, Oliver felt a strange sense of déjà vu overcome him. He couldn't understand it, but it felt to him as if he'd been here once before.

“You okay?” Hazel asked.

Oliver nodded. “I just have a weird feeling, that’s all. Like I’ve been here before.”

A frown appeared between Hazel’s eyebrows. “Perhaps you have. Another you, I mean. From a different timeline.”

Oliver pondered her words. It was of course possible that a different version of himself had been to this place before, but that didn’t account for the strange feeling of familiarity Oliver himself was having. Any different Oliver from a different timeline would have different memories. There was no way he’d be able to tap into those.

It was a complete mystery. And yet, with each footstep he took, he felt more and more like he’d walked this exact path before.

Oliver shook the thoughts from his head. It was impossible. He must’ve just been thinking of a history book he’d read, or a documentary he’d watched. Perhaps he was recalling a dream. Either way, he didn’t have time to waste thinking about it. He had to stay focused on Esther, on finding the Elixir to save her life.

Gianni led them up to a large lacquered door and rapped his knuckles against it. He turned his head and said something to David. David relayed the message in English to the others.

“This is the headmistress’s office.”

Oliver gulped. He couldn’t help but feel nervous every time he met another powerful and revered seer. He respected Professor Amethyst more than anyone in the universe and to meet his

counterparts through history was always a humbling, nerve-wracking experience.

Gianni opened the door and led them into an office. It was enormous, more like the ballroom of a palace than a head teacher's office. There were large paintings in gold frames all over the dark green walls, and a huge marble fireplace. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the smell of almonds punctuated the air.

As they moved farther inside, Oliver saw a large desk behind which sat an extremely elegant-looking woman. Though she was old, she was extremely glamorous and there was a youthful energy in her bright eyes. She had the same olive-colored skin and dark eyes as Gianni. Luscious shiny black hair hung over one shoulder in waves.

"Oliver Blue?" she asked, her voice soft and lilting, her Italian accent strong.

"Yes," he stammered, a little overcome by her strong presence.

"Please. Take a seat." She gestured to a row of chairs and smiled, her teeth white, her smile inviting. "All of you."

Oliver felt bewildered by everything, but did as he was instructed. His friends sat alongside him in solidarity.

"I'm the headmistress of the Rome Seer School," the woman announced. "Lucia Moretti. Let me first welcome you."

"Thank you," Oliver stammered. He felt a little flustered in the presence of such an elegantly powerful woman.

The headmistress continued. "I understand you were able to

activate the ancient portal that was rumored to lead you to the Elixir. I must say I am rather surprised that it led you here.” There was a sparkle of excitement in her eye. “To think, the key to finding the Elixir has been on my doorstep all along.” She smiled at Oliver. “I am not surprised that after all these centuries, it was you of all people who managed to activate the portal, Oliver Blue.”

Oliver frowned, confused. What did that mean?

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What do you mean me ‘of all people’?”

“Why, you’re the son of Margaret Oliver and Theodore Blue!” she exclaimed. “Aren’t you?”

At the sound of his parents’ names, Oliver felt his heart begin to pound. Walter and Hazel visibly jerked in their seats. As two of Oliver’s closest friends, they knew full well how he’d been desperately searching for his parents.

“You know my parents?” Oliver asked, his voice sounding breathless from shock.

“Of course I do,” the headmistress replied. A small frown had appeared between her eyebrows. “They’re rather famous in these parts. But you know all this.”

“I don’t, actually,” Oliver said hurriedly. “My parents gave me up for adoption. I know nothing about them.” His voice was racing now, as if trying to hurry through the conversation so he could get to the conclusion quicker. “Are they here? In Rome? Do you know where I can find them?”

Lucia Moretti's face fell. "I'm sorry. I feel I've spoken out of turn."

"Not at all," Oliver replied quickly. "Please, tell me anything you know. I have nothing to go on. Just their names and that they studied at Harvard. Oh, and a notebook of my father's."

The headmistress's eyebrows rose slowly up her forehead. "A notebook?" she asked. "May I see it?"

"Of course." Oliver took the notebook from Hazel, who had been keeping it in her satchel, and quickly handed it to her. If she knew anything about his parents, he wanted to know.

Mistress Moretti leafed through the book. "Oliver, do you know what this is?"

He shook his head.

"It is a formula," she told him. "A formula for the Elixir."

Oliver gasped. "What?! You mean the cure was with me all along?"

"Wait. Relax," she said. "Do not get ahead of yourself. What I mean to say is that this is an *attempt* to create the formula for the Elixir. Your parents were human, Oliver. You are aware of this, aren't you? They didn't have seer powers. Therefore, time travel was completely unavailable to them. But they moved in seer circles. They wanted to experience what seers could. Here is proof that your father was attempting to create his own Elixir. With it, he'd be able to travel in time, throughout timelines and alternative parallel worlds. But it is incomplete. He did not succeed."

A whole host of emotions vied inside Oliver. He couldn't absorb all the information he'd just been given. To think his mortal parents had been trying to unlock the secrets of time travel felt odd to him. What could they possibly want to be able to travel through time for? Seers time traveled to fulfill the destiny of the universe, to protect the timelines on her command, to undo the work of rogue seers who attempted to create havoc. But humans had no need to travel through time. It was dangerous enough for a seer, but for a human? Surely it was suicide.

He didn't know whether to be relieved that his father's formula was incomplete or not. If Teddy Blue had succeeded in creating the Elixir then he'd be able to save Esther life. But because he had not, perhaps that in itself had saved his father's life?

Mistress Moretti snapped the book shut. "Oliver, you know nothing happens by coincidence. The portal brought you here for a reason, because somehow this is the place the Elixir will be discovered. I believe this notebook is the first step. The second step comes from me."

Oliver frowned with curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"I am a mathematician, Oliver," Mistress Moretti said. "The best mind the universe has ever known. I have a mind that's rivaled only by Einstein's." She drummed her fingers against the desktop and her eyes flashed with excitement. "You need my instruction. You need my knowledge. If I train you, together we will be able to complete the formula."

"But I don't have time," Oliver said. "I'm not trying to find

the Elixir to unlock time travel, I'm doing it because Professor Amethyst told me it is the only thing to save my friend from time travel sickness! My friend is close to death." His voice cracked as an image of Esther appeared in his mind's eye. Instinctively, his hand tightened around the amulet. "I don't have time to train here."

The headmistress paused. She tipped her head to the side and regarded Oliver for a moment. "I see."

She seemed disappointed that Oliver hadn't taken her up on her offer to be trained here. He had not meant to insult her. In any other time and place, he'd have snapped up the chance to train at the Rome Seer School, to learn all the mathematical genius Mistress Moretti possessed. But he just didn't have the time.

Hazel was busy worrying her hands in her lap. She looked at Oliver with an anxious expression. "Isn't this our only chance, though?" she asked. "The Elixir has never been created. The portal led us here because this was where we could find all the pieces of the puzzle needed to create it. Mistress Moretti's mind is surely part of that puzzle."

"I can see what you're saying," Oliver told her. "But surely Esther will die before I get the chance to learn all I need to."

"There's a ritual," Mistress Moretti blurted, interrupting their conversation.

"A ritual?" Oliver asked. He didn't like the sound of that. It sounded ominous to him. Dangerous even.

Mistress Moretti nodded slowly. "It's... how should I say it..."

a complicated procedure. One I have not done before. But it may be your only hope.”

Oliver’s nerves grew even more. Her words provided him with no comfort at all.

“What will it involve?” he asked, hearing the tremble in his voice.

“It will transfer all my knowledge and abilities to you,” she explained. “It will teach you everything I know. You’ll have access to my memories, even the subconscious ones that I’ve long forgotten. Then, I believe, you’ll be able to use that knowledge to finish the formula for the Elixir. What do you say?”

The whole thing terrified Oliver. But Esther needed him. So did the school. In addition, Mistress Moretti had told him he’d be able to see her memories. She knew his parents. Perhaps her memories might also bring him closer to finding them?

“Will it hurt me?” Oliver asked.

Mistress Moretti’s lips twisted to the side in consternation. “I don’t think it will be a pleasant experience,” she told him. “I imagine that it will be quite a shock to the system.”

Oliver glanced at his friends.

Walter gave him a reassuring nod. So did Hazel, although the look in her eyes betrayed her fear. Finally, Oliver looked at David. He trusted David implicitly.

“I believe this is a good idea,” David said.

Swallowing the lump that had formed in his throat, Oliver turned back to Mistress Moretti. He nodded decisively.

“Okay. I’ll do it. I’ll do the ritual.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chris didn't know what was happening. One second he'd been in Mistress Obsidian's office, listening to her warn him that failure in this next mission would result in him being sent to a horrible hell, and then the next second he was here... wherever here was.

All around Chris, all he could see was black. He felt very calm, a bit like he was sleeping.

Images started to flash in his mind. He saw water, murky and swirling. Then he smelled that awful stench of raw sewage.

Fear gripped Christopher as he suddenly realized where he was. The River Thames! No!

Had Mistress Obsidian sent him back to that awful place? Had this whole second mission just been some kind of elaborate ruse, a way to get his hopes up only to dash them again by sending him to his watery grave? Terror began to consume him.

Chris could feel the water against his skin and all the sticky residue from the toxins in the dirty river. The smell in his nostrils made his eyes water.

He was swirling around and around and around, as if in a whirlpool. Then suddenly he saw a flash of someone else. He was not alone.

"Oliver?" Chris cried in disbelief.

His puny little brother was here, too, swirling around in the

churning waters. What was happening?

The waves crashed around them and forced them onto the banks. Christopher flopped into the mud, gasping for breath. Lights flashed like strobes around him.

Looking up, Chris saw where the lights were coming from. There were two portals standing on the riverbank in front of him, both rusted and decrepit looking, flashing their electric light displays.

As the lights flashed all around, making his vision flash in and out, Chris tried to get to his feet. He could see Oliver just a few feet to his side trying to scramble up, too.

He was heading for the portal, Christopher realized.

There was no time to waste. Still on his belly on the muddy bank, Chris threw an arm out toward Oliver, stretching as far as he could. He grabbed hold of his brother's ankle.

But Oliver was like a worm, writhing in the mud. His ankle was slippery from water and the toxic muck of the river.

Despite Chris's strength, Oliver managed to slither out of his grasp. In a second, he was through the portal. It zipped shut. The lights went out, plunging Chris into darkness.

Chris took in a huge gasp of breath. He flew into a sitting position and looked around, completely dazed.

Madeleine's face materialized before him.

"Are you okay, Chris?" she asked.

Chris swallowed the hard lump in his throat and it dawned on him that he'd been dreaming. He'd been having a nightmare, his

mind replaying the awful moment when he'd failed to kill Oliver on his last mission. He was more determined than ever not to let that happen again.

He looked around to see Natasha and Malcolm a few feet away, dusting themselves off from the bumpy ride.

"What happened?" Christopher asked Madeleine.

"We just went through the portal," she explained. "You must've fallen asleep."

Malcolm's head started up and he scoffed, as if sleeping in a portal was a sign of bad manners or something.

"How could I fall asleep in a portal?" Chris gasped, smoothing down his messed up hair.

He'd traveled through portals before. They were not particularly pleasant experiences. Usually, they made him feel like his whole body was being pulled apart atom by atom. He must have been really exhausted to have slept during transportation through a portal! It was evidence of just how hard Colonel Cain had been drilling him.

The sensation of panic Chris's nightmare had induced began to recede. He glanced about.

"Where are we then?" he asked Madeleine.

"Rome, I think. Sometime in the fifteen hundreds."

"Huh," Chris grunted. He had not exactly enjoyed going back to the sixteen hundreds and he had a feeling the fifteen hundreds would be even worse.

Natasha and Malcolm had collected themselves and came

over.

“So, what next?” Natasha asked Chris.

Chris didn’t want to waste a moment. He leapt to his feet and rubbed his hands together with delighted glee.

“Now we find Oliver,” he said, grinning devilishly at his ragtag bunch of followers. “And cause a little mayhem on the way.”

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