

OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS (BOOK FOUR)

THE SCEPTER OF FIRE



MORGAN RICE

Oliver Blue and the School for Seers

Morgan Rice

The Scepter of Fire

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Rice M.

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Morgan Rice

The Scepter of Fire (Oliver Blue and the School for Seers—Book Four)

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 of the fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL, comprising four books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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*--Books and Movie Reviews
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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--*Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

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--*Publishers Weekly*

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PROLOGUE

Oliver gazed down into Esther's eyes in disbelief. They seemed to be getting greener and greener with every second that passed, as the power of the Elixir restored her health.

"You saved me, Oliver," she said, tears glittering in her eyes.

She pulled herself out of his embrace and up to standing. Oliver did the same, staring at her like she was a ghost. Just days ago, she'd been at death's door. Now she was standing tall and strong, looking more beautiful and radiant than ever. In fact, she almost appeared to be glowing.

"Esther?" Ralph exclaimed.

"Whoa..." Walter murmured.

"You're glowing," Simon stammered, his pale blue eyes as round as moons.

"What was *in* that thing?" Hazel exclaimed, looking at the now shattered glass jar in which they'd transported the Elixir.

Before Oliver found his tongue, a sudden judder like an earthquake brought him back to the here and now.

He suddenly remembered he was back in the School for Seers and that for reasons he didn't understand the whole place was violently shaking and crumbling around them.

He glanced down the corridor toward the central atrium. Hundreds of bedraggled seer students were running around the atrium, injured, covered in debris from the crumbling walls. They were being herded by Doctor Ziblatt toward Professor Amethyst.

That's when Oliver realized what was happening. Professor Amethyst had activated the hidden time traveling portal within the kapoc tree and a swirling vortex gaped at its center. The seer students were hurrying inside, whooshing away to who knew where.

The school was being evacuated.

"That's the last of them!" Doctor Ziblatt cried, her white lab coat covered in streaks of dirt. "The school's empty."

"Then go!" Professor Amethyst exclaimed.

She looked at him, tears shining in her eyes. She gripped his hand tightly. "Good luck, sir. I hope to see you on the other side."

The old headmaster nodded. Then Doctor Ziblatt leaped into the swirling vortex and disappeared.

Oliver couldn't quite believe what was happening. He'd known that activating the Elixir would have unpredictable results but never in a million years would he have thought it could cause his beloved school to cave in on itself! The School for Seers was supposed to be indestructible! Or at least, that's always how he'd perceived it. But his meddling in timelines and with the course of history in order to save Esther's life had clearly had a devastating, unexpected impact. He'd saved Esther, but at what cost?

Just then, Professor Amethyst spotted them in the corridor. "Quick!" he cried, beckoning to Oliver and his friends from where he stood beside the vortex in the kapoc tree.

Oliver looked over his shoulder at his friends hovering behind him—Walter, Simon, Hazel, and Ralph, the best friends a boy could ever hope for.

"The school's falling in on itself," he stammered, disbelief making his throat tighten. Not the School for Seers. Not his sanctuary. "We have to evacuate."

"Let's go," Hazel said, fighting to stay upright against the force of the shaking.

The walls shook and shuddered as the gang staggered toward Professor Amethyst. The quaking was so violent it was as difficult as wading through treacle.

Inch by inch, the group closed the distance between themselves and their escape to safety. But they were an arm's length from the kapoc tree when there came a very loud *crack* from above.

Oliver gasped, his gaze snapping up. One of the kapoc's enormous branches had cracked off the tree and was falling. It was coming right for Esther!

Without even a nanosecond to think, Oliver dived, shoving Esther out of the way. They slammed to the floor with a painful crunch, Oliver landing hard on top of her. The branch slammed down beside them, bringing debris with it that rained down on them.

Esther coughed and peeped out from beneath her arms. "Thanks," she squeaked. Then she coughed again, the fine powder from the crumbling walls overcoming her.

Just then, Oliver heard Professor Amethyst yell, "NO!"

Oliver looked up, squinting through the cloud of dust, to see the swirling vortex had gone. Instead, a huge jagged zigzag had sliced across the entire trunk of the kapoc tree. The time portal had been destroyed.

Now what? Oliver thought desperately as he heaved himself to his feet.

If they could make it to the sixth dimension they might stand a chance, but that was located at the very top of the school, on the ground floor, and they were at the very bottom, fifty floors underground.

Oliver felt distraught.

Professor Amethyst hurried to them. "Quick. Come. Come now," he said, beckoning them.

Oliver had never seen the headmaster look so frantic. So scared. It only made it more clear how dire the situation they were in really was.

The gang hurried along with Professor Amethyst. The elderly man led them down a corridor marked with an X, one forbidden to students. Oliver had no idea where it would take them or what Professor Amethyst's plan was now. But he always trusted the headmaster. His mentor had never failed him yet.

They ran through the corridor, the shaking so intense Oliver felt his teeth rattle in his skull. It was like standing beside a pneumatic drill. He could feel it in every fiber of his body.

Finally, they made it to the end of the corridor. Up ahead there was a door. It looked very similar to the one they'd traveled through to get back here from Leonardo da Vinci's workshop, where he'd helped them create the precious Elixir they'd used to cure Esther. The one, Oliver thought with bitter sorrow, that had set off this catastrophic reaction.

Professor Amethyst threw open the door. A gust of wind seemed to suck Oliver toward it. He grabbed Esther's hand. Ralph grabbed his other. He looked left and right to see that his friends were all clinging to one another, Walter to Simon, Simon to Ralph, and so on, in a chain, combining their strength in order to hold their ground against the battering force of the wind.

"You must jump!" Professor Amethyst cried.

Oliver looked through the open door. All he could see was darkness.

"Where will it take us?" he yelled back.

Wind whipped his blond hair into his eyes. He realized he was trembling. Esther squeezed his hand tightly.

"Just go!" the headmaster yelled.

Oliver glanced quickly at his friends. He realized they were waiting for him to lead. To take the first jump. To be brave and show them the way.

Oliver swallowed his nerves. He let go of Esther's and Ralph's hands, and threw himself into the black.

CHAPTER ONE

In the black void of nothingness, Christopher Blue felt a whooshing sensation, like magnets being pulled together. It was a horrible feeling, and one he'd become painfully accustomed to—the sensation of his atoms coming back together. He knew what came next, once he'd been reassembled in his human form: the tearing, splitting, wrenching feeling of being torn apart, atom by atom, all over again. How many times had he gone through it now? A hundred? A million? Had he been stuck in this endless, miserable loop for days or years? There was no way of knowing. All he knew was the ongoing push and pull of the void, the feeling of all-consuming hatred, and the name *Oliver*.

Oliver. His brother. The object of his intense hatred. The reason he'd ended up here.

There was nothing else in the void. No noise. No light. Just that terrible feeling of his atoms stuck in a loop of being pulled apart and coming back together. But Chris still had his memories, and they repeated as frequently as the atom tears did. He remembered Oliver. Of his moment of cowardice in ancient Italy when he'd realized he could not kill him. And he remembered the portals closing in on him, ripping him apart limb from limb and sending him to this place between time. He dwelled on his memories as he went through cycle after painful cycle.

Then, suddenly, something changed. There was light.

Light? Chris thought.

He'd almost forgotten such a thing existed.

But here it was. A brightness. A glow. A blinding sort of light that made his eyes hurt. How long had it been since he'd seen light? Twenty seconds? Twenty years? Either answer seemed perfectly plausible to Chris.

The light seemed to be growing ever brighter, until before Chris knew it, it was everywhere. The blackness that had been his reality had been replaced by this sudden light. And then, with a whooshing noise that seemed to come from all directions, Chris suddenly found himself *somewhere*. Not *nowhere* anymore, but somewhere. Somewhere with a stone-tiled floor—cold against his stomach—and a smell in the air like an old, dank castle. Smell, like light, was something Chris had all but forgotten. Touch, too. Yet suddenly all those sensations were here.

The tiles against his stomach were hard in contrast to the fleshiness of his body. The air was chilly, and he felt a light breeze pass over his skin.

Body! Chris thought. *Skin!*

Laughing, Chris grabbed his torso, moving his hands all over it, feeling the ribs and the collar bone and all the squishy flesh. He laughed again as it dawned on him that he was no longer in the void of nothing, floating around in his smallest components, but was back in one piece, one solid piece. And that one solid piece was back in reality.

Now, he just had to work out what reality he was in.

He heaved himself up to sitting and looked around. The room was familiar. Crimson walls like fresh blood. A big, wooden throne. A conference table made of oak. A high, vaulted ceiling. A glass cabinet filled with vials of potions and weapons. A window, through which gray light filtered in.

He stood, his legs wobbling, and went over to the window. It overlooked a large grassy field that stretched all the way to a line of forest trees, black silhouettes on the horizon.

Grass! Chris thought with delight. *Trees!*

He'd forgotten all about them. And seeing them now sent peals of delight rippling through his body. His laughter turned to hysteria.

"Christopher Blue," came a cold female voice.

With a gasp, Chris swirled on the spot. There was a woman standing in the room. A scowling woman wearing a long black cloak that reached the floor. Her arms were folded.

The name came back to Chris with sudden ferocity: *Mistress Obsidian*.

A jolt of terror went through him. He staggered backward until he collided with the stone wall and there was nowhere left to shrink to.

“You...” he stammered. “You’re the one who tortured me!”

It was all starting to come back to Chris now.

“That was your punishment,” Mistress Obsidian said without even the smallest hint of remorse. “For failing me. For going against my expressed command. I can do it to you again. Anytime I want.”

Chris shook his head. He felt like he was reaching the verge of insanity. Just knowing he could be sent back to that place of turmoil, of unending agony, was enough to send his mind reeling.

“Please, no,” he begged, falling to his knees. “Please don’t send me back.”

“Get up, you sniveling wretch,” Mistress Obsidian said. “Begging won’t save you.”

“Then what will?” he asked desperately, heaving himself to his feet. “What can I do to make sure I never go back to that place?”

“Follow my instructions,” she replied. “And kill Oliver Blue.”

Oliver...

That name had been all that had accompanied Chris during his time in the void. Oliver, his little brother. For years he’d hated him. Wanted nothing more than to hurt him and make him suffer. And then for reasons he no longer understood, he’d balked at the last second. Just when he’d had Oliver, he’d changed his mind and let him go.

But Chris realized now, he would not change his mind again. There wasn’t the smallest hint of compassion left in him. Not toward Oliver. Not toward anyone. His time in the void seemed to have extinguished any positive feelings he’d ever had, leaving behind just the anger, just the fear, just the hatred.

“I will not fail you again,” Chris told Mistress Obsidian. “I will kill Oliver Blue.”

CHAPTER TWO

Oliver's stomach swirled. He hated the sensation of portal travel. It didn't matter how many times he went through it, it was always unpleasant.

Purple flashing lights blinded him. A noise like crashing waves made his ears ache. And the whole time, he looked about frantically behind him to see where his friends were, desperate for evidence that they'd jumped too, that they'd followed him into the portal and had escaped the School for Seers before it had collapsed.

Just then, he caught sight of Hazel's butterscotch hair. A jolt of relief went through him. She was flailing in the vortex, being tossed around like a piece of flotsam in a current. Then Ralph came into view, his black hair flying every which way, his long, thin limbs moving as though he were doggy paddling and trying desperately to stay above water.

Oliver watched as Ralph whooshed up beside Hazel, and the two of them managed to clasp hands. They reminded him of synchronized skydivers. Without parachutes, of course, at the mercy of the elements, being thrown about all over the place like they were feathers caught up in a tornado.

As relieved as Oliver was to see Hazel and Ralph, there was still no sign of Walter, Simon, or Esther. Oliver prayed they'd made it through the portal in time. Especially Esther. It would be far too cruel of a blow for the universe to take her from him now, after everything they'd just gone through to save her life.

"Hazel!" Oliver cried over the loud, whooshing wind. "Ralph! Over here!"

Somehow, in spite of the roaring wind, Oliver's voice was able to carry all the way to his friends. They both glanced up at him and relief flickered for a moment in their otherwise fearful eyes.

"Oliver!" Hazel cried, her tone seeped in relief.

Oliver was surprised that he was able to hear her so loudly and clearly. He'd expected her voice to be swallowed by the wind, as would usually happen during portal travel. He wondered why that wasn't happening in this one. Maybe it was a different kind of portal from the ones he'd traveled through before. Professor Amethyst had conjured it under duress, after all.

Using his arms, Oliver swam breaststroke toward his friends. He grabbed them and they held onto one another tightly.

"Where are the others?" Ralph cried, glancing furtively around.

Oliver shook his head, the force of the wind making his dark blond hair fly into his eyes. "I don't know. I can't see them."

He craned his head, searching through the black and purple flashing swirls to see if there was any sign of Walter, Simon, or Esther. There was none. He couldn't see them at all, and the thought filled him with fear. Had they even jumped into the portal? Could they be stuck inside the crumbling school? He couldn't bear the thought of having saved Esther's life with the Elixir for her to then lose it only moments later in the school's collapse. Why hadn't he kept hold of her hand when he'd jumped?

"Oliver, can you hear me?" Professor Amethyst's voice suddenly came from nowhere.

Shock struck Oliver. His eyes widened with surprise. He looked all about him but could not see the headmaster. It was as if Professor Amethyst was talking to him from another dimension.

Worried he was going mad, he turned to the others. "Did you guys hear that?" he asked, as the wind battered them.

"Yes," Hazel gasped. "It's Professor Amethyst. But how is he talking to us?"

"I have no idea," Oliver stammered in reply.

"Listen," the headmaster's voice continued, seemingly coming from everywhere at once. "This is very important." He spoke hurriedly, in an urgent, insistent tone. "The School for Seers is crumbling and there's only one way to save it. You must find the Scepter of Fire."

The Scepter of Fire? Oliver thought, racking his mind for any sense of familiarity. But there was none. He'd never heard of the Scepter of Fire.

"What is that?" he called into the vortex. He didn't know where he should project his voice because he had no idea where the professor actually was. "Where do we find it?"

This time when Professor Amethyst spoke, his voice seemed distorted. It was like speaking on a cell phone with a poor connection. His words cracked in and out. "Lost in time..."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Oliver cried, desperately.

There was silence.

"Professor?" Oliver tried again. "I can't hear what you're saying!"

But suddenly, Oliver's attention was diverted by Ralph. His friend was tugging on his arm furiously.

"Oliver, look," Ralph said.

Oliver turned his head over his shoulder. And the sight that awaited him made his whole body flood with relief. It was Esther, Walter, and Simon. At last!

The three were holding tightly to one another, just as Oliver, Ralph, and Hazel were. Oliver was overcome with relief to know they'd gotten out of the school, and that they'd now all be in this new quest together. Whatever this quest was...

Oliver was just about to ask Hazel and Ralph whether they could try to "swim" over to the others, when the headmaster's voice cut back in.

"Oliver?" Professor Amethyst called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Oliver cried. "I can! Tell me about the Scepter of Fire!"

"It has been lost," the headmaster said. "I do not know where. I do not know when."

Oliver felt his insides tense. If the Professor didn't know where or when the Scepter of Fire was, then *where* and *when* was this portal sending them to! Perhaps that's why it didn't seem to be behaving like a normal time portal. Because it didn't yet have a final destination!

The thought troubled Oliver. But just as he always did when things felt too perilous, he reminded himself of Professor Amethyst's immense wisdom. Oliver trusted his mentor with his life. He knew the headmaster would never, ever put him in undue danger.

"How are we supposed to find it?" Oliver called out to Professor Amethyst, who he now deduced must still be inside the School for Seers, and was projecting his voice into the vortex that was currently keeping them trapped between time and space, rather than transporting them through it.

"I have narrowed it down to two possibilities," the Professor shouted. "The first—"

But his voice cut out.

Oliver grew frantic. He needed to know where he was going! He needed to know why! He needed the guidance of his mentor if he stood any chance of finding the Scepter of Fire and saving the School for Seers!

"Professor!" he cried into the twirling void. "Professor? Professor!"

But once again, his voice was met by silence.

He looked up at Hazel and Ralph, who were still gripping him by the upper arms. They both looked just as troubled as Oliver felt.

A sense of hopelessness started to grow in Oliver's stomach. How would he ever find the Scepter of Fire if he didn't even know where he was going and where he needed to be?

But then a sudden thought struck him. The bronze compass he'd been given by Professor Nightingale at Harvard University was still in the big pocket of Oliver's overalls. It was an ancient piece of seer technology, one of the myriad of inventions created by seers to aid in their task of protecting the universe from time traveling rogues. Perhaps it might give him some clues and help guide him on his quest.

Oliver reached into the big central pocket, feeling his fingers brush against the cold metal casing, and pulled the palm-sized instrument out. Though he was shaking tremendously from the force of the wind, Oliver could just make out that the main dial was pointing toward a symbol of a flame.

“Oh no!” Hazel suddenly cried.

Oliver looked up from the compass to see that her gray eyes were wide with anxiety. He glanced ahead and saw the strangest sight he’d ever encountered. The portal was splitting into two separate tunnels!

Oliver gasped. Never before had he seen such a thing. Time travel portals were a mind-bending enough experience, and for him now to see the tunnel dividing into two was utterly confounding. Was it destabilizing? Ripping apart before their very eyes?

But no. Oliver put the pieces together in his mind. Professor Amethyst had said there were two locations the Scepter could be in. Now, he, Ralph, and Hazel were hurtling toward one tunnel, while Esther, Simon, and Walter were hurtling straight for the other.

“Oh!” Oliver cried, his chest clenching from the painful realization. “Professor Amethyst is splitting us up!”

It all happened so fast. Before Oliver had time to fully comprehend the strange happening, the tunnels were upon them and they were tumbling toward the entrances; he, Hazel, and Ralph heading one way, Esther, Simon, and Walter the other. He would end up in one place in time with Hazel and Ralph while the other three would end up somewhere entirely different. A different time. A different place. Maybe even a different dimension.

The thought was too much for Oliver to bear. He’d only just gotten Esther back and now she was being torn away from him again. He felt a sudden sense of anger toward Professor Amethyst for putting him through this unnecessary torment.

Acting on his instinct to protect the girl he loved, Oliver threw the compass toward the right-hand tunnel. He just had time to watch it disappear into the void, followed by the tumbling, turning figures of Esther, Simon, and Walter, before he flew into the left-hand tunnel and out of sight.

Where are they going? Oliver thought anxiously. *Come to think of it, where are we going?*

There was no way of knowing. There was no way of even knowing whether he’d ever see Esther, Simon, and Walter again. One team was on course to find the Scepter of Fire. The other, Oliver could only guess.

All he could be sure of was that the Scepter of Fire was the key to saving the School for Seers. And that wherever and whenever he ended up, whatever point in history the portal spit him out in, it would be without Simon and Walter.

And it would be without Esther.

CHAPTER THREE

Screaming, Esther felt herself catapult out of the vortex and go flying through the air. She hit the ground hard and rolled, sending a cloud of desert dust into the air.

“Oof,” she exclaimed, finally coming to a halt.

Dazed, bruised, and a little dizzy, she sat up and looked around. It was a blazingly hot, sunshiny day. She was in some kind of desert, with very little around her but some sparse, spindly shrubs.

Glancing into the distance, she saw that a mile or two away from where the portal had decanted her, there were signs of a flourishing town, from the turrets of a castle to the spire of a synagogue. Behind the town were vast mountains and a forest of pine trees.

Before she had a chance to attempt to work out when (and where) she might be, she heard the sound of screaming coming from behind, growing louder and louder as it came closer and closer.

She turned to see Simon come hurtling through the vortex. Walter was right behind him.

They both flew through the air and hit the dry, desert ground. Esther winced as she watched them go rolling across the hard earth.

“Argh!” Walter grunted.

Finally, they came to a halt, and a cloud of dust poofed into the air.

Esther jumped to her feet and ran to them. As the dust cloud they had stirred up started to disperse, it revealed that the two had become an entwined tangle of limbs.

Esther reached the tangle and grasped for a hand. She found Simon’s and gave it a tug. The two boys managed to free their legs and, with Esther’s help, Simon sat himself up.

“Golly gosh,” he said, panting. “That was a rather rough journey.”

Walter extracted his arm from beneath Simon’s behind. “You could say that again.”

He rubbed his head, then looked over at the portal. Esther did too and saw that the crackling lines of purple electricity had stopped. Then, with a *zip*, the portal closed. Silence descended.

Walter blinked rapidly as a look of fear overcame his face. “Where are the others?” he asked.

“Oh!” Esther exclaimed as she suddenly recalled the moment she’d seen Oliver, Hazel, and Ralph careen through the left-hand pathway of the portal, just before she and the others had disappeared down the right. She felt an ache deep in her heart. “They went the other way.”

Simon and Walter exchanged a sympathetic look.

But Esther didn’t want their pity. And she didn’t need it either. Since taking the Elixir, she felt better than ever. Her mind felt sharper, her senses more alert. She felt healthier than she ever had, and the last thing she wanted to do was dwell on negativity.

She dusted down her clothes and looked around her. “Right. We need to get going. Professor Amethyst said that one of the portals would take us to the Scepter of Fire. There’s no time to waste.”

“Well, hold on,” Simon said in his stilted Victorian voice. “Why don’t we take a moment to recuperate?”

Esther could hear the concern in his voice. She knew it wasn’t because of the bumpy ride through the portal. He was referring to her near death experience and the Elixir of Life she drank to bring her back to health. It had been just a matter of minutes ago she’d thought she was on the brink of death. But she really didn’t want to talk about all that right now. She didn’t even want to think about it. Not when they were on a mission to save the school.

“Didn’t you hear what the headmaster said?” she reiterated to Simon. “We need to find the Scepter of Fire.”

The boys exchanged another worried look.

“We heard,” Walter said. “And I get that you want to jump straight into the mission.”

“But you’ve been through quite an ordeal,” Simon added.

“And if you need time—” Walter continued.

“Or someone to speak to—”

“Or a shoulder to cry on—”

Esther shook her head and held her hands up to stop them. “Guys. I’m okay. You don’t have to look at me like I’m made of porcelain and might break any second. I’m fine. I’m better than fine. I’m *alive*. And now I want to find this Scepter and save the school. Can we just do that? Please?”

She didn’t want to think too hard about the fact that Oliver had been torn from her once again. That just when she’d been reunited with him, fate had ripped them apart once more. She didn’t want to think about the fact she owed him her life, nor the fact that he was the person with whom she’d fallen in love. There would be time to think later. But now, if she spent even a second dwelling on it, she knew she’d break down and dissolve into tears.

Simon and Walter exchanged a final glance, then both shrugged, clearly realizing there was no point arguing with the headstrong Esther.

“So, where are we?” Walter asked.

“I’ve no idea,” Esther said, looking about her at the unfamiliar landscape.

“And how do we go about finding this Scepter of Fire?” Simon asked.

Again, Esther was stumped. “I don’t know.”

Just then, Esther saw something come hurtling through the air right for her. It looked like a brass cricket ball and it was flying at an enormous speed right at her face.

Drawing on her switchit skills, Esther reached her hands up and caught the catapulting ball of metal. It was going at such a speed, she staggered back. Shock waves ricocheted down her arms.

Taking a moment to recover from the surprise, Esther looked down at the object in her hands. It was Oliver’s magical compass.

“How did that get here...?” she stammered.

Nothing was as it should be. The headmaster had spoken to them through the vortex. The portal had split in two. The compass had found its way to her. For reasons she didn’t fully understand, the portal they’d traveled through was different than usual, and the normal rules clearly did not apply.

“The compass can guide us!” she said excitedly, looking up from the ancient bronze instrument to the others.

“How does it work?” Simon asked.

“It shows you the future,” Esther said. “So if we interpret the symbols correctly, it will guide us to where we need to be.”

Walter frowned. “Where we *need* to be?” he asked. “Or just, you know, where we *will* be?”

Esther paused to consider his point. If Oliver’s team had taken the correct tunnel and landed in the time that would lead them to the Scepter of Fire, then whatever future awaited Esther and *her* team would be entirely different. But then again, whatever future the compass showed to them, it was their destiny to follow it nonetheless. Though it might not lead them to the Scepter, it would lead them to *something*, and that was enough for her for now.

Esther decided not to dwell too long on Walter’s point. There’d be no way of knowing which team had landed in the place where the Scepter of Fire was lost until they were holding it in their hands.

She looked down at the symbols. The main dial was pointing to a small image of a sun. Another was pointing to an anchor. A third showed what appeared to be a stick figure throwing a javelin.

Esther scratched her head, none the wiser, and looked up at the desolate, sandy area for clues. She had to shield her eyes from the blazingly bright sun, since there wasn’t anything to provide shade other than some spindly trees and some skinny, grazing goats.

“Well?” Walter asked her. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” she confessed.

"I can see the sea," Simon offered, pointing into the distance where a silver streak glittered on the horizon. He squinted. "It appears to be a harbor filled with vessels. Perhaps we're on an island? Some kind of trading hub?"

"Ooh, yes!" Esther said, her mind starting to put some of the pieces together. "That would explain the anchor. What else do we have?"

"Are those orange groves?" Simon asked, pointing once more to a densely wooded area filled with trees bearing bright, gleaming oranges.

Esther nodded. There was a corresponding symbol on the compass too, a smudge of orange like a paint splatter. "I think we might be somewhere in the Mediterranean," she suggested. "Greece, perhaps? That would explain this symbol of someone throwing a javelin. It could represent an Olympian."

Simon became quite animated at the mention of Greece. "Oh, that was some jolly excellent detective work, Esther. So we may be in Greece. But what era?"

But before Esther got a chance to answer him, Walter's brown eyes grew suddenly wide with fear, and he pointed a trembling finger ahead of him.

"What... What... What's that?!" he cried.

Heart pounding, Esther whipped her head up to see something very large glittering under the bright sun, moving on big wooden wheels at a very rapid pace, and heading right for them.

"*That*," Esther said, not quite believing her eyes, "is a golden chariot!"

There was a horse pulling the chariot, its hooves clapping loudly against the hard earth. The large wooden wheels creaked as they spun, propelling the chariot toward them at an enormous speed.

With barely a second to react, the children dive bombed. They jumped opposite directions, Esther leaping one way, the boys the other.

Esther landed in a gutter. The horse-drawn chariot went thundering past, spraying a fine mist of powder all over her.

As the sound of galloping hooves and creaking wooden wheels began to fade, Esther sat up, shaking herself, and peered across the road at Walter and Simon. As the dust the chariot had kicked up began to settle, she saw the two had landed, once again, in a tangled mess.

"Get off!" Walter cried, trying to shove Simon away from him.

"You're on my hand!" Simon contested, shoving back.

"Guys!" Esther cried, leaping to her feet and hurrying toward them. "Be quiet. I think I know where we are."

She peered along the path, watching as the golden chariot shrank into the distance, not quite believing what she was about to say next.

"We're not just in Greece," she announced, as the two boys finally untangled themselves and came to stand beside her. "We're in *Ancient* Greece."

"Ancient Greece?" Walter asked. "You mean..."

"I mean," Esther said, turning to face them, "we've traveled back over two thousand years. This is BC."

CHAPTER FOUR

Oliver tumbled out of the portal. Hazel slammed into the back of him. A moment later, Ralph arrived, too, barreling into the others.

“Ow!” they all groaned as they smooshed into one another.

“Is everyone okay?” Oliver asked, concerned for his friends’ well-being.

Hazel nodded, rubbing her elbow that had collided with Ralph. “Yes. But where are we?”

She glanced around her. Ralph, meanwhile, was rubbing his stomach—the corresponding point where Hazel’s elbow had hit.

“Hey!” he said, his eyes widened. “We’ve been here before!”

Confused, Oliver frowned and glanced around him at the buildings. They were all three or four stories tall, crammed shoulder to shoulder, with flat facades and matching burnt umber-colored roofs. The dome roof of a cathedral loomed out behind them, overshadowing everything as a dominating presence. Ralph was right. There was something familiar about the place.

Then Oliver gasped as it dawned on him. “We’re back in Florence.”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “Florence? That must be a mistake. Do you think Professor Amethyst accidentally sent us back through Leonardo da Vinci’s portal?”

Oliver shook his head. “I don’t think so. Da Vinci’s portals were red. Professor Amethyst’s are purple.”

“Well then maybe we’re here because Leonardo will help us again?” Ralph suggested. “Maybe he knows where the Scepter of Fire is? Or he can pause time for us again so we can find it?”

But as Oliver looked around, something dawned on him. “No. There are way more buildings than there were when we came to see Leonardo. It may be the same place, but it’s a different era. We’re not here for Leonardo’s help. We’re here to find someone else.”

For some reason, it felt even stranger to be somewhere they’d been before. They’d walked these streets on their mission with Leonardo da Vinci a matter of hours earlier. But now, they were on the very same streets, years, if not *decades*, later. There was something truly mind-boggling about that.

“It can’t be much later, though,” Hazel said, tapping her chin. “More buildings but they’re all the same architectural style. I don’t think we’ve landed much further than a hundred years after the point we were last here. What other extraordinary Italians might Professor Amethyst have sent us here to find?”

“Well, beyond da Vinci and Michelangelo,” Oliver began, “there is of course—”

But he didn’t get to finish his sentence, because at that moment, someone came running round the corner and slammed right into Oliver.

“I’m so sorry!” the young man cried.

Oliver straightened up and smoothed down his rumpled clothes. “I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

Hazel gasped. “Oliver, you’re speaking Italian!”

“I am?” Oliver said.

Before he could get a definitive answer, the young man who’d slammed into him continued speaking.

“I’m late for my class at the *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*,” he said. “It’s Professore Galilei’s class.” Then he hurried off.

Oliver turned to his friends. “Was that man speaking Italian?”

They both nodded.

“Yes!” Ralph cried. “And so were you!”

Oliver shook his head. “But I don’t understand. How?”

Then he remembered. Lucia Moretti, the teacher they'd met on their last adventure, had put some of her powers into Oliver's mind. Perhaps one of the things she'd given him was the Italian language?

"Wait," Oliver said suddenly. "He said he was going to a lecture by Galileo."

Hazel's eyes pinged open. "Of course. Galileo's a Florentine who came after da Vinci. We must be in sixteenth-century Italy."

"We should follow him," Ralph said.

Oliver nodded in agreement, and they all took off after the running man.

CHAPTER FIVE

“So we’re in Ancient Greece,” Walter said. “Now what?”

Esther looked around, shielding her eyes with her hand from the bright sunshine. “We should head into the town,” she said.

The boys agreed and they began to stroll in the direction the chariot had gone, following the grooved tracks it had left in the dirt.

There were many interesting structures in the town. Temples made of huge stone blocks. Humongous spherical open-air theaters with dramatic plays taking place inside. Lots of noise and braying came from a nearby stadium. They saw a castle with huge pillars and a massive drawbridge door that must’ve been at least fifty feet high. They passed a large square structure, which was several columns holding up a roof, that looked like a palace to Esther. The Greeks were famed for their architectural style, after all, and it was quite mesmerizing seeing it all in person.

They came up to a small yet bustling market, filled with wooden stalls selling many different types of food, like fresh oranges and bottles of olive oil. Fabrics were hung between the stalls, providing some much needed shade.

“This is rather fantastic,” Simon commented.

“Fantastic it may be,” Walter said. “But the locals don’t look that friendly.”

Esther glanced around. Walter was right. They were being watched cautiously and intently by the natives.

She shuddered, as the feeling of impending danger made the hairs on the back of her neck lift.

“We need to find some clothes so we can blend in,” she said, suddenly aware she was still wearing her hospital nightdress, and that she would very much like to see the back of that particular garment.

“How are we supposed to do that?” Simon challenged, putting his hands on his hips. “We don’t have any money to buy clothes.”

Esther chewed her lip in consternation. They didn’t have money, he was right about that. But they certainly couldn’t continue walking around like this. Walter was wearing a T-shirt with a bright-colored ’80s cartoon character on the front and big white sneakers. Simon was in a brown tweed waistcoat and matching suit pants. And Esther was in her thin, powder-blue hospital gown. They were so far from inconspicuous. But stealing was wrong and she knew that. There had to be another way.

“Look, over here,” she said, pointing to a pile of rubbish.

They all went over to the big pile. It appeared to be made up of broken crockery, rotting food, dead plants, tree branches, and other types of vegetation. But most importantly for them, there was also an array of ragged clothes, fabrics, togas, sandals, and the like. Even though the clothes were evidently very dirty and threadbare, it was much better than what they were wearing.

“Bingo!” Esther cried.

Simon looked displeased. “Do you really expect me to sift through a pile of rubbish?”

Esther folded her arms. “Do you have any better ideas?”

Simon looked stumped. Crinkling his nose, he approached the garbage heap and began gingerly moving items aside. Walter, meanwhile, got stuck right in there and found himself a toga and a pair of leather sandals in record time. He threw on his ensemble and grinned widely.

“How ace do I look right now?” he said, grinning, hands on hips. “If you ignore the stains, of course.”

Esther pulled her own toga on. “I mean, it’s a bit big,” she said, looking at the swaths of fabric now covering her. “And, to be honest, it’s quite similar to my hospital gown! But I like it, more or less.”

Overall, she knew she was much better off in the toga than in her stinky old hospital dress, that it was far less eye-catching and would help her blend in.

Just then, Simon emerged from behind the pile. He was still looking thoroughly displeased. He'd only been able to source a small piece of cloth which he'd wrapped around his waist like a skirt. The only thing he had on his torso was a belt made of rope, which he'd slung over his right shoulder and had diagonally crossing his body.

Walter burst out laughing. Even Esther, who was usually so serious, had to stifle a giggle.

Simon pouted. "I'm going to sunburn terribly in this. We'd better find some shade. And quickly."

But Esther ground her teeth with determination. She wasn't in the mood to listen to Simon complain about getting sunburnt.

"We're on a mission," she reminded him. "A very important mission to save the School for Seers. One so important that Professor Amethyst has split us up into two teams." She felt a lump form in her throat as she thought of Oliver, of the fact he was somewhere else in the universe, in a completely different time and place than her. "So quit complaining."

Simon sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right. The mission is far more important than how stupid I look and the fact my extremely fair skin will burn easily and make me look like a lobster. A *naked* lobster."

"Thank you," Esther replied, choosing to ignore his sarcasm. "Now, the mission must begin. Let's find the Scepter of Fire and save the School for Seers."

CHAPTER SIX

Edmund lay weeping in the small, dark room. Nothing had gone as he'd wanted. He'd hurt Esther, had been used by Mistress Obsidian, and now he'd never be able to return to the School for Seers. If Professor Amethyst ever discovered what he'd done, he'd be expelled for sure.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Edmund sat up, wiping away his tears. "Yes?"

The door opened. A ginger-haired girl looked inside. "Mistress Obsidian has asked for you."

Edmund felt his chest sink. He'd had nowhere else to go. After his betrayal of the school, of Esther, he'd awoken to find the whole place shaking violently. Then Mistress Obsidian had appeared to him and offered him a place at her school. He'd had no other choice but to take it.

He stood, his whole body feeling like lead, and followed the ginger-haired girl out of the room.

"I'm Madeleine, by the way," she said, as she led him along the dark corridors.

But Edmund was too miserable to even answer.

"You'll get used to it here," she told him encouragingly. "It's a great school."

"Sure," he mumbled, but he knew he would not.

Mistress Obsidian's School for Seers was a horrible place. His old school had been bright and modern, but this one was like a dingy old castle. It was cold. It smelled damp. He'd only been here one night and he already hated it.

Madeleine drew up outside a large wooden door and wrapped her knuckles against it.

"Enter," a voice called from inside.

Edmund recognized the voice right away. Mistress Obsidian. The woman who'd tricked him into betraying his love, Esther.

Madeleine opened the door and beckoned Edmund to enter with her.

Inside was a room that appeared to be an office. There was a big table with many seats, each one occupied by an Obsidian student. On a large throne sat Mistress Obsidian herself.

Edmund's eyes scanned the students in the room. There was a very strange-looking boy with black hair and bony features, and skin so pale it made him look like a skull with eyes. His eyes, incidentally, were so brilliantly blue they were like nothing in this world. Beside him sat a tall girl with dark eye makeup, her arms folded in a way that made her look very mean. Next to her sat a tubby boy with dark hair and completely black eyes. His gaze was fixed to the tabletop and it looked as if he'd recently been through some terrible trauma.

Madeleine, the ginger-haired girl, took the only spare seat beside the weaselly-looking boy, leaving Edmund standing there.

"This is Edmund," Mistress Obsidian announced, smiling in her chilling way. "My inside informant. My spy extraordinaire."

Edmund felt a churning deep in the pit of his stomach. How dare she pretend like he'd been in on it. Like she hadn't tricked him into his actions.

"I thought it might be nice for you to explain to everyone what happened back at the School for Seers," the headmistress continued. "Since you were *so* instrumental to the mission."

Edmund ground his teeth. He shuddered as he recalled the way the school had shaken. How its walls had begun to crumble. How the kapoc tree's branches had snapped, making the walkways crash to the ground. How his teachers and classmates—and his *friends*—had had to flee through the emergency transporter.

"It was evacuated," he mumbled, hanging his head in shame.

"And why was it evacuated?" Mistress Obsidian pressed.

She was clearly enjoying this. Edmund felt a pang of hatred toward her that was stronger than any hatred he'd ever felt for his old love rival, Oliver.

"Because it was falling down," he announced, all the bitterness he felt coming out in his tone.

All around the room, the Obsidian students burst into a round of applause. They seemed thrilled as they exchanged whispered exclamations with one another. The whole thing left Edmund feeling sick and ashamed.

Mistress Obsidian, on the other hand, looked utterly delighted. “Amethyst’s School for Seers faces ruination,” she announced, waving her hands with a flourish. “And so now is the perfect moment to send in an assault team.”

Edmund gasped. “No. Please, just let it be! What else is there to take from the school? Didn’t you already get everything you wanted?”

Mistress Obsidian sneered. “Edmund, Edmund, Edmund. Dear, stupid boy. The School for Seers contains some of the most important artifacts known to our kind. Professor Amethyst has kept locked away so many scrolls and texts, so many archives. He is sitting on so much knowledge. He thinks of himself as a gatekeeper, you see. He believes he and only a small number of seers scattered throughout history can be trusted to know the secrets of the seers. But I believe in *sharing* information. I wish to *liberate* the knowledge he’s kept locked up for himself all these centuries.”

Around the table, Edmund saw all the seer students nodding in agreement. So that was the lie Mistress Obsidian had fed them, he thought. Where she’d used his love for Esther to get him to do her bidding, she was spinning a tale to her students, too. They all thought of Professor Amethyst as some terrible man who kept all the seer secrets to himself. But Edmund knew better. He knew Professor Amethyst was the best seer in the universe. That he had taken a great burden upon his shoulders. That his heart was pure and all he ever wanted to do was teach his students right so that, together, they could keep the universe safe.

It dawned on Edmund that he’d betrayed the best mentor he could ever have been privileged to know. That the school he loved was doomed. That he was to blame for it all. He felt crushed. Hopeless. Desolate.

Mistress Obsidian’s eyes flashed with malevolence. She clapped her hands loudly. Suddenly, a swirling portal appeared at the far end of the room.

Wind rushed through the office. Edmund gasped, feeling it batter his clothes and hair.

Mistress Obsidian rose slowly from her throne and smiled, the lights of the portal flashing in her irises.

“Madeleine. Natasha. Malcolm,” she said. The moody black-haired girl and the strange skull-face boy leapt up at her command, as did Madeleine. Mistress Obsidian looked at the chubby boy. “And Christopher.”

He rose to his feet. There was something *wrong* about him, Edmund thought. Something less than human. He seemed haunted, like he’d gone through some terrible trauma. And he looked mean, like he wanted revenge.

“You are my team,” Mistress Obsidian announced. “My best and most brilliant students.”

Edmund watched, his stomach roiling with shame, as the four Obsidian students headed for the portal to finalize, once and for all, the destruction of the School for Seers, a process he’d set in motion the second he’d teamed up with the evil Mistress Obsidian.

“It is time,” she roared, shaking her fist to the sky. “Time to unlock the secrets of the seers once and for all!”

The four children disappeared through the portal and Edmund felt his shoulders slump. The School for Seers was doomed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oliver, Ralph, and Hazel hurried after the boy, following his tracks as he ran through the streets of Florence. Oliver couldn't quite believe they were in the time of Galileo. He had met so many of his heroes while traveling through time, it was kind of mind-blowing. If someone had told him back when he'd read his inventors book cover to cover that he would one day be meeting some of the people inside it, he would never have believed them!

Up ahead, a row of beige-painted, terraced buildings came into view. They were between four and six stories high, with each floor having a series of small, neat square windows. The terrace looked to Oliver like a row of townhouses, but the boy they'd been following hurried in through the carved wooden door of a four-story building. And as they drew closer, there, carved into the stone plaque beside the big, tall door, were the words *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*.

"It's much smaller than I expected," Ralph commented.

Hazel ran her fingers over the grooved letters, as if trying to absorb some of its history. "You know our friend Michelangelo studied here, too?" she commented.

"Friend?" Ralph joked. "I don't think meeting someone once makes them a friend."

"He helped us save Esther's life," Hazel replied with a displeased frown. "That definitely doesn't make him a foe!"

"Guys," Oliver interrupted. "Now's not the time to squabble. Come on, let's get inside."

He pushed on the large oak door, and it creaked open. Oliver felt like he was intruding on somewhere secret. It was a feeling that often overcame him when he poked around in the past. It was hard to truly accept that as a seer on a mission, the universe condoned his being in this time and place. He was always expecting some stern teacher to jump out and tell him to go away.

The *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno* was rather chilly inside, thanks in part to the marble floor and small windows that let in very little of the warm sun. The dark vibe was only emphasized by the lacquered wood paneling that went halfway up the walls, and a series of similarly varnished joists running across the width of the ceiling above them. Imposing stone statues stood at intervals along the length of the corridor, completing the grand, foreboding atmosphere.

As the children paced inside, their footsteps echoed. Oliver looked down the corridor, left, then right.

"There he is!" he cried as he saw the boy disappear in through a door.

They hurried after him and went in through the same door.

They were now in a large lecture theater that reminded Oliver, painfully, of Doctor Zibblatt's classroom. It had the same horseshoe of benches and a stage in the middle, but instead of everything being white, shiny, and modern, the theater was made of wood. Instead of a big projector screen, there was a blackboard upon which was scrawled writing in white chalk that read: *The art of perspective is of such a nature as to make what is flat appear in relief and what is in relief flat*.

With a sudden sparking sensation, Oliver realized he recognized the quote. He felt a strange stirring in his mind as if cogs were turning. Then he worked out how he knew the quote. It was one of Leonardo da Vinci's. And Oliver had not recalled the memory of it from a textbook or an overheard conversation, but had drawn it from his very own mind. That stirring sensation was his brain accessing Leonardo da Vinci's knowledge, knowledge he'd implanted into Oliver's mind during their last mission in Italy.

The shock was all-consuming. In the chaos of saving Esther and jumping through the portal, Oliver had all but forgotten about Leonardo's implanted memories. Not only did he have Mistress Moretti's immense seer powers and intelligence lying dormant in the gray matter of his mind, but he also possessed none other than Leonardo da Vinci's! And just as Moretti's language skills had suddenly appeared when he'd needed them, so too, it seemed, Leonardo's knowledge was presenting

itself to him. He wondered what other skills he may have acquired, the circumstances needed to access them, and the situation within which they may need to be utilized. Speaking Italian would certainly stand them in good stead for the rest of their time in Italy.

Oliver brought his attention back to the young Galileo, who was standing on the stage ahead of him. He looked to be in his early twenties, Oliver thought. Surely then, this was before he'd made many—indeed, *any*—of his great discoveries. Recalling the chapter in his favorite book of inventors, Oliver thought about how Galileo had been in his forties when he'd worked on the law of falling bodies and parabolic trajectories, and studied mechanics, motion, the pendulum, and other mathematical formulas. He'd been in his fifties when he'd made his great astronomical discoveries—mountains on the moon, the moons of Jupiter—and challenged the long-held belief that the earth was at the center of the universe, a belief that saw him condemned by the church.

Oliver sifted through his memories, trying to work out what the young Galileo had been working on in his twenties. It must have been his lost era, when he'd left the University of Pisa without graduating, having flip-flopped between studying medicine, mathematics, and philosophy. He wondered why Professor Amethyst would have sent them to meet Galileo at a point in history when he'd not yet discovered anything of worth.

Oliver, Ralph, and Hazel slipped into the back row of seats. As Galileo began to conduct his lecture, Ralph leaned in to Oliver.

“I don't understand a word he's saying.”

“It's in Italian,” Oliver whispered back.

Ralph folded his arms. Hazel pouted.

“No fair,” she said. “I'd love to know what he's saying. Can you translate?”

But Oliver shushed her. “I can't translate if I can't actually hear what he's saying, can I?”

Hazel frowned and slunk down in her seat, adopting the same folded arm pose as Ralph. Oliver felt bad that they were going to have to sit through an hour of what was sure to be an extremely fascinating lecture without understanding a single word of it.

“As we can see here,” Galileo was saying, pointing to a painting that depicted a woman in a blue and red dress holding a little creature, “the figure has been positioned diagonally within the space, her head turned to her left shoulder, which is closest to the viewer. Thus the back of her head and right shoulder have been deeply shaded. Meanwhile, her right hand, resting here upon the ermine's flank, and indeed, the ermine itself, as well as her nose, face, and left shoulder, have all been lightened. Thus, the artist has given the impression of the light diffusing. This gives us an understanding of distance, of position in relation to light.”

Lady with an Ermine, Oliver thought, the name of the painting suddenly popping into his head from nowhere.

Hazel leaned in closer to Oliver. “That's one of da Vinci's paintings,” she said.

Of course.

Again, the memory was being pulled from the ones da Vinci had instilled inside his mind. But this time, the memory felt more visceral, as though it brought with it not just information but *feeling*. A pang of melancholy throbbed in Oliver's chest as it dawned on him that, in this timeline, the man whose knowledge, memories, and emotions he now carried was deceased. And even though Oliver knew all time existed at once, that it was not linear, it still made him sad to think that at this point in history, the brilliant Leonardo was gone. That his awesome mind lived on only inside of the recesses of Oliver's.

A hand on his brought Oliver back to the moment. He looked over and saw Hazel's earnest gray eyes.

“Are you worrying about Esther?” she whispered, her tone gentle.

Oliver let out a sad chuckle. “I am now.”

“Oops, sorry,” Hazel replied, realizing her mistake. She frowned. “What were you thinking about then, if not her? You looked utterly miserable.”

Oliver twisted his lips. He didn’t want to burden Hazel, but he also knew it would only harm him in the long run if he kept his secret in.

“Da Vinci,” he whispered, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the focused students sitting all around them. “I can feel him.” He tapped his head. “Up here.”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “You mean his knowledge?”

“His knowledge. His memories.” Oliver moved his hand so the fingers rested over his heart. “His feelings.”

“Goodness,” Hazel replied, looking shocked.

Just then, Ralph leaned over. “What are you whispering about?” he asked, his voice far louder than the others’ had been.

Several students sitting on the bench ahead of them turned around with angry glares and their fingers to their lips. “Shh!”

Ralph went red with embarrassment and sunk into his seat. He folded his arms, looking miffed at having been kept out of the secret.

The three friends remained throughout the entire lecture. Hazel spent the whole time sitting straight-backed and eager. Ralph, on the other hand, seemed bored out of his mind. At one point, he almost seemed to doze off.

But Oliver himself was filled with a mixture of sensations. Memories and feelings that belonged to Leonardo were being tugged up through him as Galileo discussed his theories of perspective in art throughout the class. It was peculiar, to say the least, and Oliver was relieved when the lecture was finally over.

As the students filed out, the children headed the opposite direction, going down the steps and approaching Galileo.

“Excuse me,” Oliver said, finding the Italian language roll effortlessly off his tongue. “Mr. Galilei?”

“You’re a bit young to be in my class, aren’t you?” Galileo said, looking him up and down.

“We’re not in your class,” Oliver told him. “We’re seers.”

He decided to lay it all out on the table. Professor Amethyst had sent them to this time and place for a reason, and every great inventor they’d met during prior missions had turned out to either be a seer or know about seers. There was little point beating about the bush.

He saw a flicker of recognition in the young man’s eyes. But Galileo played dumb.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, collecting up his papers.

“I think you do,” Oliver pressed. “We were sent to Florence. By Professor Amethyst. Perhaps you know him? He runs the School for Seers. We’re on a mission to find the Scepter of Fire. Have you heard of it, by any chance?”

By the way Galileo was now shoving papers into his satchel, Oliver could tell that he did, indeed, know something. Something he, for reasons unknown, was not comfortable discussing.

“I’ve never heard of it,” he claimed, no longer meeting Oliver’s eyes.

Oliver strongly suspected that Galileo was lying, though he didn’t know why. Perhaps he wasn’t a seer. But there was certainly something unusual about him.

Oliver decided to be bold. “We’re from the future,” he said.

“Oh really?” Galileo said. He stopped what he was doing. “Then tell me something that’s not yet been discovered to prove it.”

Oliver hesitated. He knew how finely balanced everything was. How cautious they had to be in order not to upset things. How one small misstep could cause a catastrophic reaction.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Hah,” Galileo replied. “Just as I thought. You’re lying.”

“We’re not,” Oliver said. “Challenge me to something else. Something only Leonardo da Vinci would know.”

Hazel tugged at his elbow. “Oliver, what are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” Oliver told her, speaking out the side of his mouth.

“Okay then,” Galileo said, tapping his chin ponderously. “The Duke of Valentinois commissioned da Vinci to draw a map of the town of Imola. In what year?”

Oliver searched in his mind for da Vinci’s memories. “1502,” he said.

Galileo frowned. “A lucky guess.”

“Ask me another,” Oliver challenged. “And I’ll prove it wasn’t a guess.”

“Okay,” Galileo said. “Perhaps a question related to geometry. Tell me about the five terms of mathematicians.” He smiled smugly, as though he believed there was absolutely no way Oliver would be able to answer correctly.

Once again, Oliver tapped into the part of his mind that had been bestowed to him by da Vinci. “The point, the line, the angle, the superficies, and the solid.”

Galileo looked stunned, but also impressed. “And what is unique about the point?”

“Why,” Oliver said, “it has neither height, breadth, length, nor depth, whence it is to be regarded as indivisible and as having no dimensions in space.”

He was directly quoting da Vinci now, pulling forth the inventor’s very words from the recesses of his mind. Hazel looked utterly stunned. Ralph, on the other hand, seemed to be finding it a little disconcerting that Oliver had access to such knowledge, and that he seemed able to draw it out of himself at a moment’s notice.

But that was beside the point, Oliver thought. He looked at Galileo to see if the man had been convinced. He certainly seemed to be pondering the three children.

Finally, Galileo looked intently at Oliver. “And why did you say you’d come here to see me?”

“We’re seers,” Oliver said. “From the future. We believe you can help us find something called the Scepter of Fire.”

Galileo paused for a moment, his eyebrows drawn inward. “Perhaps you ought to come with me,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Professor Amethyst stood in the shaking school. It had been evacuated fully, and now only he was left. But he could not just flee. The sixth dimension was full of scrolls and textbooks, artifacts and weapons. Before he could leave, he had to secure the room and lock it all safely away. If any of the seer technology fell into the wrong hands, it could mean the end of the world.

There was, however, one very large snag. Professor Amethyst had exhausted almost all his powers. From creating the wormhole in the kapoc tree to evacuate his staff and students and the second portal for Oliver Blue and his friends, to then projecting his voice through the vortexes of time and diverging the two paths, the old man had drained himself. And because of the violent tremors of the school as it went through the process of collapsing in on itself, the elevator—supersonic, just as he'd invented it to be—was broken. Professor Amethyst, who was accustomed to being whooshed through all fifty floors in a matter of seconds, would have to take the stairs. He'd have to climb fifty floors to reach the sixth dimension. He had no idea how his frail, ancient knees would handle such an undertaking. But there was no other choice. He had to make sure none of the weapons or inventions were ever released into the world.

He began his ascent. But he'd only made it to the first floor landing when he heard an awful noise come from the foyer below him.

Hurrying to the balcony, Professor Amethyst glanced over and down to the central atrium below. Many of the kapoc's branches had already broken, as had the walkways they'd previously held up, and the debris lay scattered all over the ground. But there, between the chunks of plaster and concrete and the thick wooden branches, Professor Amethyst saw a glowing, flickering light.

"A portal," he said aloud.

He knew what that meant. There were only a few seers in existence with such powers, and only one he could think of who'd want to breach the school.

Sure enough, the large portal widened and widened until it was big enough for a stream of students to file out. They were all wearing the recognizable black uniform of Mistress Obsidian's School for Seers.

Professor Amethyst narrowed his eyes with anger. Magdalena Obsidian had, many years earlier, been his brightest student. Her mind had been powerful and boundless. A mind to rival his own. An intelligence matched only by Newton. By da Vinci. By Oliver Blue. He'd wanted to challenge the young seer, but the missions he'd sent her on caused her mind to balloon. She'd wanted more knowledge, more access, more artifacts, and she'd wanted to take all the knowledge of the future and apply it to the past.

At first, her quest was admirable; use the foresight of the future to spare humankind of the mistakes of the past. Indeed, almost every young seer Professor Amethyst taught had asked the same thing. "Why can't we *change* the past?" But where most young seers accepted that a seer's duty was to follow the guidance of the universe, to mend the cracks and fissures in the order of things, Magdalena Obsidian refused to accept it. In her idealized mind, such events *should* be rewritten, whether the universe had chosen it or not.

"The task of a seer is to keep the world on the path of least destruction," Professor Amethyst recalled telling her once in his office, as they'd sat by the fireplace, she just a young girl of twelve. "We cannot erase Hitler, but we can stop him from obtaining a nuclear bomb. We cannot stop the great world wars, but we can minimize their casualties."

But the girl had refuted his claims. She'd refused to follow his teachings, refused to accept a seer should not divert the course of history entirely. And once she'd discovered that she was a cobalt seer and began reading up on all the cobalt greats, well, her mind darkened. Finally, she chose her

devastating path, went rogue, and started her own “school,” finding seer children before Professor Amethyst was able to and corrupting their impressionable minds.

He’d had no choice but to put a protection spell around the school that banned her from ever entering. Not that such a thing would stop Magdalena Obsidian. Now, she just sent children to do her bidding, or manipulated the laws of the dimensions for her own means. He knew what she’d done with Edmund. She’d twisted his mind by projecting herself through the dimensions, something extremely dangerous that he’d only ever done one time, out of desperation, in order to tell Oliver he needed to find the Scepter of Fire. He knew, too, that she sent her little army of students through time, that she’d even summoned the dark army. She never got her hands dirty herself. Professor Amethyst had mused away many an hour wondering why. He’d come to the conclusion that she knew if she ever looked her old mentor in the eye again, she’d have to confront the reality of her situation. That she was wrong. That she’d gone rogue. That she’d left nothing but destruction and chaos in her wake.

Suddenly, Professor Amethyst heard the clattering footsteps of the Obsidian children as they began to race up the steps toward him. He doubled his efforts to ascend. But he felt his knees creaking. His bones and muscles weren’t strong enough for this. He was thousands of years old, after all. There was only so much the seer body could take.

He would have to fight them.

The last thing Professor Amethyst wanted was to fight children, especially the ones who’d been brainwashed by Magdalena Obsidian. But on the other hand, every minute the Obsidian students spent in the School for Seers was another moment they *weren’t* pursuing Oliver or Esther on their quests to locate the Scepter of Fire. Perhaps he could buy the two teams some time by causing a distraction.

Just then, he heard footsteps reach the landing behind him. He twirled on the spot. Four children were facing him; a girl with ginger plaits, a second with black hair and nails, a pale boy with bony cheekbones and a long, thin, shrew-like nose, and a final boy, heavysset with broad shoulders like a quarterback, and the most disconcertingly coal black eyes.

“Ah,” Professor Amethyst said, jovially, to the four. “Welcome. Are you prospective students? I’m afraid the school is undergoing something of a transformation at the moment. It’s zapping out of time. So it’s unlikely I’ll be unable to take on any new students until the old shakeroos are resolved.”

The four children looked at one another, confused, their expressions vile and conceited. Professor Amethyst felt only pity for them, for failing to find them before Magdalena Obsidian, and for the inflated egos she’d given them.

“What are you yammering on about, old man?” the large boy said.

The darker one turned to him and sneered. In a nasty voice, he said, “Don’t you know who that is? *That’s* Professor Amethyst.”

The headmaster continued with his distraction tactics. He put a hand on his chest. “Oh! Am I famous?”

But the children had lost their patience. They glared at him, teeth bared like feral creatures, and began to advance.

Professor Amethyst felt a lump form in his throat. It was time to fight.

CHAPTER NINE

“What is the compass telling us now?” Simon asked Esther.

She looked down at the bronze instrument. All the symbols it was showing seemed to be related to the ocean—boats, fish, the anchor again.

“I think we should head to the harbor,” she said.

The sun beat down on them as they journeyed along the narrow path toward the glittering ocean. The masts of many vessels bobbed up and down, and Esther marveled at them. Their designs were ancient. They were so old that Esther couldn’t even think of any wrecks that had survived to the modern era to be viewed in museums, so to see them with her own eyes was truly awe-inspiring.

When they reached the harbor, it was just as bustling as the market had been. There were men dressed in linen cloaks hauling nets filled with fresh fish, as well as boats unloading precious cargo from faraway lands. This was clearly a very important trading hub, Esther reasoned.

Luckily, thanks to their outfits, they drew barely any stares at all, and were able to mill around looking for clues as to their time, whereabouts, and where they might find the Scepter of Fire.

“Rhodes,” Simon said suddenly. “We’re in Rhodes.”

“Really?” Esther asked, her eyes widening with surprise.

Rhodes was one of the islands that belonged to the Greek empire. She wondered why the Professor might have sent them here rather than to the mainland. She racked her brains, trying to recall which Ancient Greek philosophers resided in Rhodes in the BC years.

“How do you know?” Walter asked Simon.

Simon pointed to some lettering printed on a sign beside the harbor. It wasn’t in the same alphabet, but a completely different one. Walter pulled a face.

“How’d you get Rhodes from that?” he said. “Looks like gobbledygook to me!”

Simon rolled his eyes. “My education in Victorian London was extremely fine. We studied both Latin and ancient Greek. Honestly, there’s no better way to read the old philosophers than in their own tongue.”

As the boys squabbled, Esther attempted to work out what date they may have arrived in. She recalled the Colossus of Rhodes, the great statue built beside the ocean and one of the ancient wonders of the world. But all they could see of it now were the two columns of stone upon which its feet had once stood. So they must have arrived after its collapse in 226 BC.

That narrowed it down slightly. But they were still a long way from anything concrete.

“Since you know so much about Greek philosophers,” Esther said to Simon, “any idea which ones lived on Rhodes?”

“Well, there’s Andronicus of Rhodes,” Simon said. “Who lived here around 60 BC.”

Just then, Esther’s attention was drawn to an elderly man sitting on an upturned crate alone, staring out to sea. Something about his face seemed familiar to her, though she couldn’t quite place it. The way he was staring contemplatively was at great odds to all the people hurrying around him. His clothes made him look rich and important. The way he stared out to sea as though in deep thought made him seem scholarly. There was also a pile of parchments on his knee that Esther could just make out was filled with sketches.

Whoever the man was, he appeared to be someone of importance. A scholar. Perhaps even a philosopher. And considering most of the scholars of the past turned out to be seers, or linked to seers in some capacity, she decided he was a good place to start.

“Is that him?” Esther asked, interrupting Simon’s monologue about philosophers and pointing at the man.

Simon squinted and shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand. “Well, I wouldn’t know. I don’t think there are any surviving portraits of Andronicus of Rhodes.”

Walter gave a shrug. “Meh. He looks like a philosopher to me. We may as well go and say hello.”

He waltzed off in the direction of the man. Simon and Esther exchanged a glance and a shrug, then followed after their confident, unfazed friend.

But as they drew closer, Esther suddenly realized where she’d seen the old man’s face before. It was in the history rooms of the School for Seers! The school had lots of busts on display of famous scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, politicians, and the like. This face—though now lined with wrinkles—belonged to Posidonius, the Stoic philosopher whose teachings had been mainly lost in time.

Esther flailed out an arm, gripping hold of Simon by the wrist. “I think I know who that is.”

Simon was nodding, clearly having put two and two together at the exact same moment as Esther had.

“Posidonius!” they both cried in unison.

The man looked up sharply from his work. He took in the sight of Walter standing before him, who, despite his toga and sandals, still looked very different with his dark skin amongst all the bronzed Greeks. Then his gaze flicked to Esther and Simon, roving from their feet to their heads. He looked just as surprised at the sight of pale Simon in his cobbled together outfit.

He frowned, clearly confused by the three young children standing before him who somehow knew his name and had exclaimed it with such enthusiasm.

He began to speak. But Esther had no idea what he was saying since he was speaking in ancient Greek. She turned to Simon.

“Can you translate?” she asked.

Simon shifted from one foot to the other, his cheeks starting to go a little pink. “Well, no. I mean, we learned how to *read* the language, not speak it.”

Walter laughed. “So much for a fine education.”

“Actually, no one knows how to properly pronounce the ancient languages,” Simon contested.

“Hush,” Esther said to them both. “Stop squabbling. We need to work out a way to communicate with Posidonius. He must be the reason we’re in Rhodes.”

“So who is he?” Walter asked.

“Posidonius,” Esther repeated. She searched her mind for everything she could recall of the philosopher. “He studied physics, and astrology, and how the tides are controlled by the moon. Ooh, and he died in 51 BC at the age of eighty-three.”

She looked at the old man again. He looked to be roughly that age now. That must be where they’d landed: Rhodes, 51 BC, during Posidonius’s last days alive.

“And you think he’ll help us?” Walter asked. “That he’ll help us find the Scepter of Fire?”

“I don’t know,” Esther confessed. “But that’s usually how Professor Amethyst’s missions work. He sends us somewhere to find a seer to help in the quest.”

She thought of Oliver and their mission together back in the time of Newton. She missed him desperately. But now was not the time to get sidetracked by emotions.

She turned back to Posidonius and tried again. “Seers,” she said, pointing at the three of them, hoping the term translated universally across all languages. “Seeeeers.”

Simon shook his head. “That’s not working.”

“Scepter!” Walter said, miming a long baton. Then he wiggled his fingers like a campfire. “Of Fire.”

Posidonius’s frown just grew stronger. In fact, he looked rather irritated by the intrusion of the children. With a heavy sigh, he stood and swirled off away from them.

As she watched him go, Esther felt helpless. Why would Professor Amethyst have sent them to Rhodes, approximately in the year 51 BC, if not to speak to Posidonius? What other person might they be here to speak to?

“Look!” Walter cried. “Old Posidonius left something behind!”

He reached forward and grabbed a stack of papers that had been resting against the crate. They were definitely Posidonius's. He must have forgotten he'd placed them there.

Esther was just about to run after him and hand them back, when she paused. Maybe whatever Posidonius had been sketching would provide some kind of clue.

She held up the first page. It was a rather detailed sketch of a building. There was a word written beneath it.

"Simon, do you know what that says?" she asked.

The boy leaned closer and squinted. "Ah, yes. That word means *school*." Esther watched as his eyes quickly scanned the rest of the writing. "It appears that Posidonius is setting up a school on one of the surrounding island archipelagos." Then he began to chuckle. "According to his notes, his Stoic philosophy is not welcome here."

"Show-off," Walter mumbled.

Esther turned to the next page in the stack. This time, the picture Posidonius had drawn was a map. Each island had been labeled.

Simon began to read them aloud. "Kos. Patmos..."

Esther recognized them all. But then one name Simon uttered made her pause.

"Cousteau?" she said, repeating what he'd just said. "There is no island called Cousteau."

"You're right," Simon said. "It must have been renamed."

But Esther's mind was going into overdrive. "Why does that name sound familiar to me?" she said, tapping her chin contemplatively.

Simon continued. "Well, whatever it means, it appears to be the same island upon which Posidonius has drawn a large X for the location of his school."

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