

LOTTIE AND THE MIRROR MONSTERS

by

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ABSTRACT

Lottie is ten years old and still afraid of monsters. Her father, who is a scientist, is always telling her that there's no such thing, but Lottie can't bring herself to believe him—and can't stop seeing things that are not there behind her reflection in mirrors.

Then one day in Spring, Lottie's father and stepmother are kidnapped while Lottie is just across the street at the park. Death himself comes to rescue her, and he tells Lottie that the Nimetu—monsters that live in the Mirror World—are the ones who took them. Death says that the Nimetu are planning an invasion of the human world and are stealing the names of the dead in order to pass from their misty world into ours. Furthermore, he says that Lottie is really a magical guardian of humans: a Sentinel. The whole world depends on her mastering abilities that she didn't even know she possessed.

Lottie and Death team up with cantankerous Sylvester the Finder and moody Philomena the Seer. Together, they embark on a quest into the dangerous Mirror World. They encounter a spirit bridge that hunts and eats anything that crosses it, young Nimetu who are terrifying, and elder Nimetu who are even more terrifying. Everyone's talents come together to help, but in the end, it is Lottie's ability as a Sentinel combined with her knowledge of science that defeats the Nimetu and rescues her parents.

Aimed at ages eight to ten years old, *Lottie and the Mirror Monsters* is a grand adventure of a tale, by turns frightening, poignant, and funny. It's a story in which there is no comfort in telling yourself that there's nothing to fear, that what scares you isn't real—because it is all real.

But it's also a story of fighting what you fear. And winning.

LOTTIE AND THE MIRROR MONSTERS

Brigitta Albares

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Chapter 1 In Which Bad Things Happen to Lottie

Lottie knew a great many wonderful and interesting things, like why catfish have whiskers and how to get a scraped knee to stop bleeding quickly. She knew where to find nearly a dozen different star constellations in the night sky. She knew great words like nebula, widdershins, and defenestrate. What Lottie didn't know was how the sixth grade girls had found out about her fear of the school bathrooms. She had science class with them, even though she was only in fifth grade, but she didn't talk to the sixth graders unless she had to and she absolutely did not tell them about all the things that frightened her.

"Please, let me out!" Lottie cried, pounding on the bathroom door with her fists.

"Not until you say it!" came the reply, accompanied by muffled snickering. "We'll let you out if you just say it, Lottie."

"Snotty Lottie, trapped in the potty," sang the other girls who were barricading the door. "Snotty Lottie, trapped in the potty!"

Lottie stopped beating on the door and leaned against it instead. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her heart crashed against her ribs with each thump. She knew there was no getting out until they let her out.

Lottie was new at this school and she wasn't good at making friends. Unfortunately, it seemed she was fairly good at making enemies. The school was old and filled with little quirks, among which were the bathrooms. The doors swung out into the hall rather than into the rooms, and the light switches that controlled the bathroom lights were on the outside, beside the door. This made the girl's bathroom a perfect place in which the older sixth grade girls could lock their victims, in the dark. And Lottie, with her old-fashioned

name, red hair, glasses, and timid, bookish disposition was one of their favorite victims, though until today they had never thought to make her play Bloody Mary.

That morning, while brushing her teeth—not looking into the mirror—Lottie had known that today would be trouble. She'd felt it. But it would have done no good to tell her father. Not without evidence to back her up.

Standing in the dark of the school bathroom, Lottie wished she was the type of kid who would lie to her parents about feeling sick. Then she wouldn't be where she was. Then bad things wouldn't have happened today.

Without the lights on, the only light came from two narrow, high windows on the far wall, with frosted glass. It made the tiles that covered the floor and walls gleam cold, like it was winter in the bathroom, and it made the salmon pink metal walls of the toilet stalls look dark, like scabs. A huge mirror loomed over the sinks, big enough to swallow Lottie whole without even noticing.

Lottie closed her eyes. Then she opened them again. Not seeing whatever horror would come for her was worse than seeing it.

She had been afraid of school bathrooms since her friends back in third grade had told her the stories of Bloody Mary, back in her old school, and how, if you stood in a dark bathroom in front of a mirror and said her name three times, she would appear behind you. Some stories said she'd hurt you and you'd have a scar to show off later. Others said she'd only look at you. A few said she'd kill you. Lottie was not really sure which version scared her most.

“Just do it, Snotty!” one of older girls called from the other side of the door, where they were all leaning so she couldn't get out. “We'll let you out after. Just go stand in front

of the mirror and say her name and then we'll turn on the lights and let you out. We *promise.*"

Lottie swallowed and pushed herself away from the door. She could feel her heart beating in every corner of her body. Her fingertips and ears throbbed so that she could barely even hear the older girls. Very slowly, Lottie walked the three or four feet to the place that was right in front of the mirror. Her dark reflection stared back at her without eyes, from a faceless face. It shook and Lottie realized how badly she was trembling.

"Bloody Mary," she whispered.

"Louder, Snotty Lottie!" the girls called. "We can't hear you!"

A choking sound clawed its way out of Lottie's throat and her face was hot and sticky with tears. She swallowed down her heart and tried to stop imagining flickers of movement in the mirror, movement of things that weren't really there.

"Bloodymary!" she yelled, quick, the words tumbling over each other.

"One more time and we'll let you go!" Snicker snicker. Giggle giggle.

Lottie took a breath. Closed her eyes. Images of a decrepit, wild-eyed woman with protruding veins and long, sharp fingernails filled her mind. This woman would grin a horrible grin and she would come closer and closer. Lottie could almost feel her breath on her skin.

Opening her eyes and not meaning to, Lottie took another breath. She stared at her own faceless face and formed the air bubble just behind her teeth for the "B," ready to push the name out as fast as possible and run back to the door. Then, behind her reflection, Lottie saw movement. Something that wasn't there was definitely there, but it moved too quickly. Lottie knew in a flash that it was something alive and gasped out half the name:

“Bloody—”

“What are you girls doing?” demanded a grown-up voice from out in the hall.

There was the sound of panicked shuffling and then the lights went on above Lottie. Her own reflection and no one else’s stared back at her from a pink, pale room. Her face was a patchwork of white and red, blotchy, and shiny with tears and sweat. Then the door opened and Lottie turned to look.

“Oh dear.” It was a teacher—Lottie thought she taught fourth grade, but couldn’t remember the woman’s name. She took Lottie’s hand and led her out of the bathroom.

“There there, dear. Don’t cry. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Chapter 2 In Which Lottie's Father Doesn't Make It Better

That evening at dinner, Lottie's stepmother, Joyce, told her father the story. The Principal had called the house to let Lottie's parents know about what had happened in the bathroom. Joyce said the phone woke her from a nap. She was supposed to take lots of them now—doctor's orders—because the twins in her belly sapped up all her energy. Lottie's father furrowed his brow when he heard about the interrupted nap, but Joyce waved at him like she was trying to sweep the concern off his face, and smiled at Lottie.

"That must have been really awful, sweetie," Joyce said. "You must have been so frightened. If those girls were mine, I'd lock them in a dark room and scare them! See how they liked it."

Lottie had always liked her stepmother. Her own mother had died when Lottie was five, in a car crash. Three years later, her father had remarried. Joyce was kind and she made Lottie feel included, but sometimes Lottie worried that it was wrong to love her, even though her father did. She called her "Joyce" and not "Mom," in an attempt to remain loyal to her mother, and usually that felt like enough.

"Joyce, don't get too worked up, please," Lottie's father said. "Think of the twins."

Joyce laid a hand on her big belly, which made it difficult for her to sit too close to the table now. She shook her head.

"They're angry too," she said. "They're kicking like anything."

"Don't be silly," he said, but he smiled. Then he sighed. "But Lottie...while what those girls did was certainly very cruel, there was nothing to really be afraid of in that bathroom." He turned back to Lottie, who tried to focus all her attention on her lasagna. "There's no such thing as monsters, Lottie. You know that."

Lottie rolled her eyes. Her father was a scientist and he believed in things he could see, even if they were so small they couldn't be seen without a microscope. He had explained about what was real and what wasn't to Lottie many times before, and she knew he was right, but sometimes she just couldn't believe it.

"Dad, I know," she said.

"Then why were you so frightened?" he asked. "And there's no need to roll your eyes at me."

Lottie shrugged. She could not explain the waves of certainty and dread that had crashed over her in the bathroom, as the lights shut off. Could not explain that while his explanations made perfect sense, they still didn't feel true. And she certainly couldn't mention that she'd seen things moving in the mirror, in the dark—again.

"Oh, leave her be, Ben," Joyce said. "She's had a tough day."

Lottie's father opened his mouth and then closed it again. "You're right," he said. "I'm sorry, Lottie. It's just that I don't want you to be scared when there's nothing to be scared of. You know that, right?"

"I know," Lottie replied. But she didn't feel better.

* * *

That night, both of them tucked Lottie in, like they had when she was little and they'd only been dating. They always did when Lottie had been badly frightened earlier in the day—when they knew about it, anyway. Lottie thought about asking her father if he would leave her light on just for this one night. She knew she'd have trouble falling to sleep once she was alone in the dark again. But she didn't ask. She knew what he'd say: there

was nothing to be afraid of and when her eyes were closed, it would be dark anyway. Lottie squirmed a little under her covers and tried to be okay with having her lights off.

He kissed her forehead. “Good night, Miss Lottie,” he said and straightened up. “Sleep well.”

“Night, Dad,” Lottie said.

As her father moved toward her door, Joyce leaned down carefully and kissed her cheek, then stood up again with a little grunt of effort. She smiled though, like she was laughing at herself.

“Night, Joyce,” Lottie said.

“Sweet dreams, dearheart,” Joyce said.

Lottie’s father turned off her light as he left her room, spinning the dial down to dim the lights before pushing it to turn it off entirely. Lottie could hear the floor in the hallway creak as he walked down the hall to his study. When Joyce reached the door, she paused and turned back to look at Lottie. With one hand, she turned the light back on, still dimmed, but not off anymore, and with the other she raised a finger to her smiling lips.

“Thank you,” Lottie mouthed silently.

Joyce mouthed back, “Welcome,” and shut the door softly behind her.

* * *

That Saturday, Lottie’s father took her fish watching. It was almost November, but the weather was still very warm and he wanted to go, even though she had homework due on Monday. Lottie didn’t argue. Fish watching was an activity that belonged to just her and her father.

That day, the sun shone bright and warm, but not hot enough to make them sweat. Only the very edges of the leaves on the trees had begun to change yellow and orange. Lottie and her father sat on a big, flat rock that jutted out into the river. The air smelled like river water and mud: heavy, sharp, and rich. It was close enough to the water that they could watch what was happening under the surface easily. They had come here many times over the summer, before school started.

So far on this trip, they'd seen water gliders skimming along the surface of the river, keeping to the calm pools around the rock, catfish snuffling the river bottom for prey, a little orange spotted sunfish that darted through the water like a bit of flame, and a blue heron stalking through the reeds on the far side of the river. Lottie's father asked her questions about what they saw, quizzing her, and she got nearly every answer right. Each time she'd gotten something right, her father had beamed at her, and not in the dumb way that teachers did. When Lottie's father beamed at her, she knew she'd done something right, something worth doing. Giddy, Lottie scampered to the other side of the rock: the riffle side where the water ran fast and swirling. She crouched down, one hand holding back her red hair and the other holding the edge of her glasses, so they wouldn't slide down, and squinted into the rippling water.

"Dad, come see this," Lottie called.

Her father came to kneel down next to her. He looked where she pointed, squinting just like she was.

Lottie had found caddisfly larvae. They were clinging to the rocks a few inches below the water's surface, grazing on algae. Each had its case. Caddisfly larvae all made little cases around their bodies, like armor. It depended on the exact type they were and

what they ate—some used wood chips, some used water grasses. The ones she was looking at now all had little suits made of tiny pebbles barely larger than grains of sand. Bug and case together weren't even as long as her littlest finger.

Lottie squinted to see them better and leaned closer to the water. She held her glasses in place with one hand. She felt her father's hand on her hair.

"Nicely done," he said, and Lottie could hear the smile in his voice. "Those little bugs are hard ones to find."

"Yeah, but they're one of my favorites," Lottie said. "I always look for them."

"Why are they your favorites?"

"They're so weird," Lottie replied. "They look like they pulled tiny little castles to pieces and now they're wearing the towers as dresses."

Her father laughed. "Good answer."

Lottie looked up at him and smiled. Sometimes she thought she lived to hear her father tell her, "good answer."

"See, Miss Lottie?" her father said then. "There's plenty of better things to think about besides monsters. Just keep focusing on real things. They're just as strange. Like water bugs that make their own armor. You don't need to go believing in monsters to have something interesting to think about."

Lottie felt her stomach fall and suddenly the river looked flat and colorless. She looked down at the caddisfly larvae and now they seemed creepy. Little tubes of debris with flailing, pointed legs and pinchers at one end. But she nodded.

"Okay, Dad," she said.

Chapter 3 In Which Death Comes to Lottie's House

The next day, Lottie was across the street in the park reading. Lottie's father had been making suggestions all day about ways she could make friends at school and deal with the bullies without getting so frightened. Exasperated, Lottie had grabbed her newest book—a story about a princess who befriends a dragon—and headed for the door.

“Take your dad's watch,” Joyce had said. She unbuckled the big, gold watch with the leather band from Lottie's father's wrist and handed it to Lottie. “Come home by 5:30 for dinner, okay?”

Lottie slipped the watch into the pocket of her dress and left the house. It wasn't long before she was under a tree, immersed in her book, and ignoring the other children playing on the playground and chasing each other around the open spaces. None of them were friends of hers. Some lived in her neighborhood, and a couple had even invited her to play once or twice when she'd first moved there with her parents, but she'd been too shy and said “no.” And they hadn't asked her again.

The day had been quite warm earlier, and very bright. Now, some clouds had gathered and the air was just beginning to cool, like the day was starting to let out a long-held breath. The playground across the street from her house was at one end of the park and was made all of brightly painted metal tubes, everything a different color. Lottie had often wished it looked a little less hectic. It was like they'd let first-graders pick the colors and where to put them. The other side of the park was just a big field with a few trees. On windier days, parents and children would come there with kites. Sometimes Lottie and her father would join them. But next summer, Lottie remembered, they'd have to buy a new kite because their last one had been broken when they'd pulled it out of the tree it had

crashed into. She wondered if Joyce would come with them to fly the new kite, and hoped she would. The twins would be born by then. Lottie wondered if babies liked kites.

After finishing a second chapter of her book, Lottie took out her father's watch and looked. The big hand was pointing not at the six, but at the seven. She was late. She closed the book and carefully crossed the street, perching on the curb to look both ways first. She opened the door with her key and coughed. Smoke streamed out of the house.

"Dad?" she called.

She walked into the house and shut the door, expecting her father or Joyce to come out and tell her everything was fine. This wasn't the first time one of them had burned something while they were cooking, though this was certainly the worst the smoke had ever gotten.

"Joyce?" she called and walked into the kitchen.

A very tall, dark figure was standing at the stove, frantically twisting dials. One of the little plastic knobs was laying on the floor. The fire on one of the burners still glowed like a little blue crown. Lottie stopped moving and stared. Her heart skipped a beat and then made up for it by pounding harder.

The figure swore and took a step back from the stove. He held out a long, robed arm that ended in a very pale, very thin hand.

"Oh, be *still!*" he ordered.

The stove stopped. The smoke stopped. The fire and the smoke were still there, but now they were perfectly, perfectly still. Lottie, too, stood perfectly still, afraid even to breathe.

The dark figure opened the oven door, leaned over into the still, still smoke, and removed a pan from inside with his bare hand. He tossed it into the sink with a metal-on-metal clatter, and Lottie saw little burned circles that had probably once been cookies. They smoked softly, like chimneys, but as the smoke rose, it joined the motionless cloud above and froze too. Then he took the pan off the frozen blue flames and it clattered into the sink with the burned cookies.

He turned around and Lottie saw that he wasn't really a person at all. His face was nothing but a white and grinning skull and his hands were only bone. Then she noticed the long, gleaming scythe leaning on the counter next to the stovetop.

"Lottie?" Death asked, though how he managed it without lips or a tongue, Lottie could not have said.

Dumbly, Lottie nodded.

Death held out his hand to her. "Come. We must go. It is not safe for you here."

Lottie shook her head and shrank back. "No. No," she said. "Where's my dad? Where's Joyce? Did you kill them?"

"I killed no one. Please come with me. Your father and stepmother have been kidnapped. I will explain. But not here. We must get you away from here."

"But this is my home!" Lottie yelled. Suddenly her eyes were full of tears, threatening to spill over. She turned away and looked up the hall. "Dad! Joyce! *Dad!*"

"They are not here, Lottie," Death said behind her.

But Lottie wasn't listening. She ran from room to room, under the eerily still smoke, calling for her father, calling for Joyce. They weren't in the living room or the dining room. She ran up the stairs. They weren't in the bathroom or the almost-finished nursery. They

weren't in her room. They weren't in theirs. Lottie stopped there, stopped running and stopped calling. She stood in the doorway and stared at their bed, neatly made each morning by Joyce.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Death's hand was warmer than she'd expected.

"I came as fast as I could, but I was too late," he said. "The mirror monsters were not here for them. They were here for you. That is why you must come with me now."

Lottie sniffed. None of this felt real. She looked up at the white skull, the dark, empty sockets, and she trembled.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere safer."

He held out his hand again and without really thinking, Lottie took it. Death led her back downstairs and in the hallway, Lottie saw something scrawled on the wall. She hadn't noticed it before with the smoke and the noise. The letters were jagged and sloppy, and a dark greenish color. As they got closer, Lottie could see there was some kind of goop in the letters, like someone had written on the wall with scummy pond water. The white paint around the letters was bubbled and cracked. Finally, she read what they said, feeling numb and only a little annoyed.

"We'll be back for you, Sentinel!" the words said.

Death led her past the words on the wall to the front door, but when he opened it, all that lay beyond the threshold was a swirling, sparkling vortex. Lottie's father had shown her pictures of galaxies and nebulas taken by the Hubble space telescope. What lay beyond the door looked something like them.

“What’s a Sentinel?” Lottie asked, staring out into the swirling nothingness outside her front door.

Death hesitated. Then he said, “You are.”

And Death led her through the door.

Chapter 4
In Which Death Explains

Lottie expected them to fall, but they didn't. They walked, but the ground was soft, like when she walked on the deep, squishy cushions of their living room couch. She looked back, but the door was gone. All that was left was clouds of space dust. She sniffed because crying had made her nose run, and realized that the swirling clouds smelled tart and ripe, like the raspberries that grew on the thorny bushes behind her old house.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"One of the between places," Death replied. "We will not stay long. It is a shortcut. It is not safe for you to be here for very long."

"Because of the..." Lottie paused to remember what he'd said in the house. "Because of the mirror monsters?"

"No. Because you are a live human girl, and this is not a place for live human girls."

"But—"

Then they came to a blank spot, like a hole in space. Death led them through it, and suddenly they were in the woods. Lottie looked behind herself again, just in time to see a door in a large tree close and disappear. Birds sang and the wind made the leaves sigh up above them. Lottie looked around, but she didn't see any trails or picnic tables or anything made by humans—the woods she was in were truly wild and deep. She looked back up at Death.

"Aren't you supposed to have a horse?" she asked, suddenly, without really intending to.

"Hmm?" Death said and let go of her hand. He took a few steps away and looked all around them.

“A horse,” Lottie repeated. “Death is supposed to ride a big, skeleton horse.”

“Oh, yes.” Death turned to look at her again. “Well, I did for a while, but now I rather prefer doors. There is a nice simplicity to them. And besides, I am an anthropomorphized manifestation of life and death, so to a certain extent I am what people expect me to be or want me to be, and these days people seem to like doors.”

He gestured to Lottie with one skeletal hand, waving her to follow him, and walked off through the woods. He still looked around himself, back and forth. Lottie couldn't tell if he was looking for something or if he was looking out for something. Death used his tall scythe like a walking stick and the blade flashed when it caught a bit of sunlight from above.

Lottie followed, looking around herself too. Then she realized what Death had just said. “Wait, what do you mean you're life *and* death?” she asked, jogging to catch up with Death's long strides.

“They are just two sides of the same coin,” he said and shrugged. “I am the coin.”

They stopped at a tall, thick oak and Death stroked the bark with his free hand. The little bones in his fingers made tiny tinkling sounds against the rough bark.

“You look a lot more like death than like life,” Lottie said and shivered again.

She was feeling less and less real with every passing moment. It was pleasant, actually. It was much better than feeling miserable and afraid, and Lottie was sure that if things started to feel real again, she would certainly be feeling both very miserable and very afraid. At the moment she was only a little bit afraid, and that fear was directly linked to being alone in the woods with a talking skeleton with a huge, sharp-looking scythe.

“Oh, I have many shapes and forms, depending on what I am doing,” he said, turning from the tree to look down at Lottie. “See?”

Suddenly he was no longer the dark-robed skeleton, but a bright white man with hair made of fire, like the sun in the form of a human. Then he was an old, bent crone under a gray veil. Then a tall, dark-skinned woman with round hips and a green gown. Then a man made out of leaves, beard and all. And then he was Death again, the skeleton in the robe and carrying the scythe.

“I can look like anything, really,” he said, and looked, Lottie thought, rather pleased with himself.

“Oh,” Lottie said, lamely. “But then why look...like that?” She waved her hand in his direction. She noticed that her fingers trembled and she returned her hand to her side, and hoped that he was not offended.

Death, however, just held his scythe out to catch a glimmer of sunlight coming down from between the leaves above them. “Because this one comes with a neat scythe.”

“But...” Lottie began, and thought better of it.

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

For a long moment, neither of them said anything, and Lottie avoided his gaze.

“Do I frighten you in this shape?” Death asked.

Lottie just nodded, but didn’t look at him.

“I am sorry, Lottie. Wait. I shall look like something else.”

Lottie felt a twinge of guilt. She looked up and smiled—tried to look like she’d only been kidding. “Don’t worry about it. I know you really like that scythe.”

“It is all right. I can keep the scythe even in another form. I will try a whole new shape, one without any rules attached to it. That way I should be able to keep the scythe, even without the exposed bones and the robe.”

Before Lottie could even nod, Death shrank and began to change. It wasn't the quick, one-to-the-other change that he'd done before. This one took a minute. After he was done shrinking, his robe changed to pants and a shirt. Then suddenly he wasn't only bones anymore and he had hair.

Then, like he'd been standing there all along, a boy about her age was standing in Death's place. He was still pale and very thin, but he was thin like a person is thin. His clothes were just simple black jeans, a black t-shirt, and black boots. His face was broad, with large dark eyes, and his black hair was cut the same way most of the boys in her class had theirs: short on the sides and a bit longer on top. Really, the only thing truly remarkable about his appearance was that he still held the scythe, which was now nearly twice as tall as he was.

“Is this better?” he asked. His voice was different, more like a child's in pitch.

Lottie let out a little sigh, grateful that Death hadn't listened to her when she'd said he could stay a skeleton if he wanted. “Yeah. Thank you.”

“Good,” he replied and nodded once, shortly. Then he returned to looking around the forest. “Now, shall we get back to it?”

He strode off into the forest again and this time Lottie had a much easier time keeping up with him.

“What are we doing?”

“We are finding a tree.”

Lottie looked at him, her eyebrows raised, but he wasn't paying attention to her.

"Well," she began, "I guess this is the place to look for trees. What—?"

Death stopped at a birch and licked it.

"Um. What are you doing?" Lottie asked.

"I am attempting to find a very specific tree," Death replied. He picked a bit of bark off his tongue and shook his head. "Not it."

They set off through the trees again.

"Okay, I have a question," Lottie said.

"Ask," Death replied, stopping at a maple this time. He licked it, made a face, and then moved on again.

"Actually, I have a few questions. One: the tree you're looking for has a special taste?"

"Yes."

"But a minute ago you didn't even have a tongue. You were a skeleton."

"Yes."

Lottie sighed, getting frustrated. He might look like a kid but he was still acting like a grown-up—he didn't even notice that what he'd just said was total nonsense.

"But how were you going to find a tree with a specific taste before when you didn't have a tongue to taste with?" she asked, trying to sound patient.

"Oh, the bones in my left hand can taste when they need to," Death replied, waving his now fleshy left hand at her.

"That makes absolutely no sense," Lottie told him, and watched as he licked a pine.

“Of course it does,” Death said, and spat out some bits of bark onto the ground. “Blech. Not the right tree. Well, maybe it does not to you. You have to know all the details before it can make sense.”

Lottie squinted at him. She knew about needing all the details. Her father had frequently said such things to her—you need to know all the facts before you can come to a conclusion, he’d say. She reached into her pocket and rubbed the smooth face of her father’s watch with her fingertips. Thinking of him made Lottie’s stomach do a little lurch, and she pushed him to the back of her mind again—took her hand out of her pocket.

“Fine,” she said, following Death again. “Then what are all the details?”

“Oh, well, it is fairly complicated,” he said.

Lottie stopped in her tracks and folded her arms over her chest. After a few steps, Death seemed to notice she wasn’t with him anymore and stopped. He looked back.

“I’m not stupid,” Lottie said. “If you’ll just explain it, I can understand.”

Death sighed and motioned for her to follow him again. She did and Death began talking. “Well, it goes something like this. You know how dolphins use echo location?”

“Sure,” Lottie replied. “It’s that thing where they squeak and then the sound echoes off things they can’t see, and when they hear the echoes they know where the things are and even how big they are.”

“Well, before their ears hear the echoes,” Death said, “the vibrations of those echoes are picked up by the dolphin’s jaw bone. It amplifies the sound so their ears get more use out of it. But basically, they can hear with their jaw bones.”

Lottie considered this. “And you can taste with your finger bones.”

“Basically.” He stopped at another oak, this one even bigger than the one before it.

He stepped close and licked it, but he didn't look before he licked, and he caught the legs of a daddylongleg spider with his tongue. The spider scurried up the tree trunk as fast as it could, probably thinking Death meant to eat it up. Death wrinkled his nose at the spider.

"There are some advantages to finger bones over tongues however," he said, quietly.

Lottie winced. She wasn't as squeamish about things like spiders and snakes as some other girls her age, but she hoped she'd never end up licking one.

"Yeah, I can see that," she said.

Lottie looked up at the big oak. Between the two of them, Lottie figured she and Death might be able to reach all the way around the trunk.

"This is the right tree, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is," Death said, looking surprised. "How could you tell?"

Lottie shrugged. "Because we aren't running off again. So question four: *why* are we looking for a specific tree in this forest?"

"Oh. Yes. Because we need to get to Kin House, where you will be safe for a while. Kin House is a safe place—magically safe, and even I can only get to it from particular directions. Trees act as gateways. Usually any tree will do. This time I needed a specific one. Shall we?"

Death reached out a hand and Lottie almost took it. Then her stomach did another little lurch, and she stopped. Suddenly she felt tears burning from behind her eyes.

"First tell me what happened to my dad and Joyce," she said, barely able to whisper.

Death hesitated. Now that his face could move, Lottie saw the muscles tense around his mouth and eyes, unhappily. She knew that face. Grown-ups made that face when they had bad news to tell her. Lottie meant to wait for him to speak, but her mouth betrayed her.

“You said they were kidnapped by mirror monsters,” she said. “You said that they came for me, but I wasn’t there.” Then the tears that had been burning behind her eyes came forward, and Lottie was crying again. “But I was supposed to be there! I was late coming home! If I’d been there, then—”

“Then they would have killed you all,” Death said. He took another step toward her and placed his hand on her shoulder, like a grown-up would have.

Lottie wiped her eyes. That did not make her feel any better.

“Why did they take them?” she asked. “What are they?”

“They are called Nimetu,” Death said, “but that is just another word for Nameless. They are the descendants of monsters that once lived here in your world. Except when they lived here, they lived in bodies of water: lakes, rivers, oceans. Humans used to live almost exclusively by bodies of water you know, but eventually you figured out aqueducts and plumbing and things, and you moved to all kinds of places, which made you harder to hunt. But you also invented mirrors, and behind them, unknown to you, was a new world: the Mirror World. So the water monsters moved there. They thought it would make hunting easier.”

“Why mirrors?” Lottie asked.

“As I said, because mirrors are very prevalent—there is at least one in every human home,” Death said.

Lottie shook her head impatiently. “No, I mean why not something else? We all have floorboards too and the water monsters didn’t move into the floorboard world, right? So why mirrors?”

“Oh. It is because water and mirrors have enough in common to make the move easier. Water is reflective and, obviously, liquid. Mirrors are reflective as well and glass is always a liquid.”

“It is?”

“Yes. Of course, it is also a solid. But if you look at windows in old houses, you will see that the bottom of the pane is thicker than the top—because the glass is still moving, still flowing, still, fundamentally, a liquid.”

“Hmm,” Lottie replied, making a mental note to check the next old window she came across.

“Because of these physical similarities,” Death continued, “the magical properties of water and mirrors are also similar. Humans have known this for centuries—you have all sorts of superstitions about mirrors. Some are true. Just as bodies of water are dangerous, so are mirrors.”

“Okay,” Lottie said, deciding to accept all this for the time being. “So they moved into the mirrors to hunt. So what are they doing now?”

“Now they want to come back to your world.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Since humans beings became human beings and not just apes—since you began making things and telling stories and naming yourselves—there have been people with

special abilities. Like the super heroes in your movies and comic books. Some of these abilities are inherited. Do you know what that means?”

Lottie nodded. Of course she did—her father was a scientist. “That’s when something is passed from the parents to their kids. Like I got my red hair from my mom.”

“That is not all you got from your mother,” Death said. “Lottie, you are a Sentinel—a magical guardian of humans. This is an ability that is passed down from mother to daughter, through the millennia. Your mother would have told you if she had not died when you were so young.”

“So...” Lottie gathered her courage. “So the things I see in mirrors—the things that aren’t really there.... Those things are real?”

Death nodded. “Yes. Most humans would never notice them, but you are a Sentinel. Even with no training, you can see what other humans cannot—what they refuse to see. That is why the Nimetu want you. They have a plan to come back to the human world, but they knew the Sentinels would stop them.”

“So there are other Sentinels?” Lottie asked.

Death hesitated again. “Technically, yes. But the Nimetu set traps. They planned. They went after the adult Sentinels first and then their daughters. Some they trapped in mirrors—little pocket mirror worlds like cages inside their world. Others....Most, they killed.”

Lottie felt her insides sink even as her hair stood on end. She bit her lip to keep it from trembling. She put out a hand and leaned against the big oak tree.

“Why kill some and not others?” she asked. She didn’t know why she asked that question. It just came out. What did it matter?

“For their names,” Death responded quietly. “The Nimetu are Nameless, and nothing can live in the human world without a name. It is an immutable law, like the speed of light. But the only way they can get names is to steal them...from the dead.”

“Is that why they took Dad and Joyce? For their names?”

Death shook his head. “I am unsure. The Nimetu are neither alive nor dead, so their actions are not easy for me to anticipate or understand. I think that they wanted you—that they still do, so they took your parents as hostages. By the time I got to your house, they had already taken your parents. I was unable to catch the few that remained before they had re-entered the Mirror World via your bathroom mirror. All I could do was wait for you to come back. To save you at least.”

“So it is my fault that my parents got taken,” Lottie whispered. “If I’d just gotten home on time—”

“No, I told you, it would not have made any difference,” Death interrupted. “Do not blame yourself, Lottie. Your parents need you to be strong—we all do.”

Lottie sniffed, suddenly annoyed. She looked down at the grass. “Why?”

“Because you need to rescue them.”

Lottie’s head snapped back up with surprise. “Me? You said there were other Sentinels.”

“You are the only one who has not been captured or killed,” Death said. “I tried to save more but...”

Lottie shook her head and said nothing. It was up to her to save her parents as well as the captured Sentinels? She felt her lower lip tremble. If she was the only one left, then it really was up to her. She needed her father, needed Joyce. What would she do without

them? And soon Joyce would have the twins and Lottie would be a big sister—she'd really been looking forward to that. Lottie sniffed.

Death patted her shoulder and smiled. He smiled like he wasn't used to making the movement. One corner of lips twitched, making his smile lopsided, which made him look even more like a boy her own age. Then he took her hand in his again.

“I am going to help you. The Nimetu are throwing off the balance of the worlds by stealing the names of the dead—not just of Sentinels, but of ordinary mortals too. I have to help stop them. But now I need to bring you to the others—others like you at Kin House.”

“I thought you said I was the last one,” Lottie said.

“The last free Sentinel, yes. But there are still people who can help you. I am taking you to them. First you need a safe place to rest and you need help. Then we can go rescue your parents and stop the Nimetu. Come.”

A door appeared in the side of the big oak. It was painted red this time and had a brass knocker. Death opened it and led Lottie through.

Chapter 5
In Which there is Whispering at Kin House

This time, when Death opened a new door in the stardust, it opened onto a long hallway. A rug ran down its length and the walls were lined with pictures. Lottie could see several doorways standing open between the pictures. Beside the door were two pairs of shoes, one for a woman and one for a man. Then a head poked out from one of the doorways, and was followed by the rest of the woman. She was older than Lottie's father, with graying hair pulled up into a bun. She wore overalls over a floral shirt with the sleeves rolled up and slippers on her feet.

"Death, is that *you*?" the woman asked, coming down the hall toward them, brows knit but lips grinning. "You look adorable!" Then she turned her eyes to Lottie, and her whole face relaxed with relief. "You found her in time!"

"In a manner of speaking," Death said.

The woman led them back to the doorway she'd come through while Death explained about Lottie's father and Joyce. The doorway led to a large kitchen with a big, wooden table and an olive green refrigerator. The wallpaper was full of flowers the color of pumpkins. On a dull, black, elderly-looking stove, several big pots were softly making cooking smells. Lottie's stomach rumbled and she remembered that it was about dinner time.

"You poor thing!" the woman exclaimed when Death was done. She took Lottie's hand in hers. "Well you're safe here, my love. There's not a single mirror in the whole house, and we have good thick drapes to go over the windows when it gets dark."

"They can get in through windows?" Lottie asked.

“No,” the woman said. “They can only come through to our world through a mirror—a proper mirror made of glass with a silver backing. They can’t come through something that’s just reflective like a polished spoon. But they can *see* you through other things, especially windows at night, when the darkness outside makes the glass act like a mirror. So we just cover them all up until it gets light again. I’m Gertie, by the way.”

“Oh,” Lottie said. Her head spun.

Death had taken a seat at the table and leaned his scythe on the wall beside him. The blade was mirror-bright. Lottie suddenly wondered if the mirror monsters would be able to see her through the reflection on her glasses. She swallowed.

“Can I use your bathroom?” she asked.

“Of course. It’s the last door on the left.” Gertie pointed back out the door to the hallway.

Lottie nodded and walked down the hall. Now she noticed that none of the pictures on the walls had glass over them, though they all had frames. The bathroom was wallpapered a light blue with a white sink, toilet, and bathtub with lion’s feet. There was a dark rectangle over the sink where Lottie supposed a mirror had once been. She closed the door behind her.

She went to the window and looked out, holding the curtain aside with one hand and adjusting her glasses with the other. Outside, beyond a green lawn, there was nothing but woods. It was dim, but not dark yet. Lottie could hear crickets singing through the window pane. Something about the feel of the trees outside told her that she was a long way away from any town, and a long, long way away from home.

The edges of Lottie's lips pulled, and she sniffed. She traced her finger along the bottom of the glass and tried to gauge whether it was thicker there than at the top of the pane. Maybe. But she didn't know how old this house was.

Outside, a robin landed in the grass and began pecking for worms. Its red belly stood out in the dullness of the evening. It looked happy. Lottie hated it and its happy, fluttering wings. She tapped on the glass to try to frighten it away. The robin looked up at the house and Lottie tapped again, harder this time, but the robin went back to hunting for worms.

I can't even scare a robin, Lottie thought.

She let the curtain fall back, suddenly feeling bad for trying to scare the robin in the first place, even if she had failed. She reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out her father's watch. It was nearly seven in the evening, big hand on ten, little hand brushing the corner of the seven. Lottie's stomach gave a lurch. She pressed her lips together and shoved the watch back into her pocket.

Lottie washed her hands at the sink, worried that if she didn't do something, Gertie and Death would know she'd just gone to the bathroom to be scared.

When she returned to the kitchen, there was a new person sitting at the big kitchen table, an old man with white hair and wrinkles. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up like Gertie's. When Lottie came in, he saw her and smiled, adding more wrinkles to his face.

“So this is Lottie,” the old man said. “The Sentinel. I'm Dale, Gertie's husband. We're Hosts.”

“That means we never lack for shelter or food, no matter how many people we have under our roof,” Gertie said, when Lottie made to ask. “It also means that our house is always safe—or at least safer than anywhere else. That’s why Death brought you here.”

“Where are we, though?” Lottie asked. “Where in...the world, I mean?”

Only hours before, Lottie would never have considered asking where on Earth she was—much less secretly considering the possibility that she was somewhere else entirely. But if Death could take her into a place between worlds, then who knew where a place like Kin House was?

“Northern Wisconsin,” Dale said.

Lottie felt her heart fall a little and realized she had been half-hoping that she was in some kind of exotic, magical world. Or maybe somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. Or at least Canada.

Dale laughed. “I know it isn’t exactly glamorous, but it is safe. Now, are you hungry, hon? Gertie here’s been cooking all day. And I hear you missed your supper.”

“I’m kind of hungry,” Lottie admitted.

“Then have a seat, love, have a seat,” Gertie cooed. “Do you like chili?”

Lottie nodded and sat down in the chair next to Death. The great, shining scythe still leaned against the wall behind him.

“May I have some too, Gertie?” Death asked. “I so infrequently have taste buds.”

Gertie laughed. “Why not?”

She served each of them a big bowl of chili, then set a piece of cornbread down next to their bowls. The dishes were pale ceramic that looked handmade. Their spoons were

white plastic. Lottie couldn't see even the outline of her reflection in any of it. She lifted a spoonful to her mouth and blew on it to cool it.

“Why are you making so much food?” she asked. “Are more people coming?”

“That's the plan,” Dale said. “We've sent word out. Any Kin who think they can help should be headed our way. I know the Finder is already on his way.”

“The Finder?”

“Well, the best one,” Dale amended. “There are lots of Finders, of course.”

Death nodded. “Good,” he said around a mouthful of chili. A little of it dribbled down his chin. Death looked surprised, wiped his chin with his hand, and then his hand with his napkin. He swallowed his mouthful before continuing. “We will need his help sooner rather than later.”

“Can the Finder rescue my parents?” Lottie asked, feeling a little swell of hope.

“He will be able to help, certainly,” Death replied.

Lottie sighed and went back to her chili. For the rest of the meal, she was quiet. When Gertie asked, she said she was tired. They sent her to bed as soon as she was done eating.

“It'll be a big day tomorrow,” Dale said.

“Yeah,” Lottie replied, and followed Gertie into the hallway and up the stairs.

Gertie showed her to her own little room on the second floor with flowered wallpaper, a little bed with a quilt, and a big window that had been entirely blocked off by another quilt that had been stapled all around the edge to the window frame. No draft could possibly nudge it aside to expose the darkened window beyond, for which Lottie was grateful. Gertie opened the door to the closet to reveal a nightgown and several outfit's

worth of clothing, all perfectly in her size, though not always to her taste. Death promised to be right next door, and they left Lottie alone.

Lottie changed and got into bed. She placed her father's watch carefully on the nightstand beside the bed and turned out the light. It was very dark without it. Lottie turned it back on and lay down. For a long time, she tossed and turned. She listened as slowly everyone else went to bed, and the house became silent. She listened as everything went still. She listened to the crickets outside, muffled by the window and the protective blanket over it. It took a long time for her to fall asleep, and when she did, it was fitful and she woke up now and then and had to wait to drift off once more.

Once, late into the night, while she was lying there wishing she was asleep, Lottie thought she heard whispering. She lifted her head and look at the door to her room, but it didn't take her long to realize that the sound was coming from her window. All the hair on Lottie's body stood on end. She wondered if she should do something. If she'd been back in her own bed, she would have just tried to ignore it, to tell herself that her father was right, that it couldn't be real. But she wasn't in her own bed and her father had been terribly, terribly wrong.

Before Lottie could decide to get up and go get Death or Dale or Gertie, the whispering went away. Lottie stayed in her bed trembling, and tried to pretend that she thought maybe there had never been whispering in the first place. She hardly slept at all after that.

Eventually, she heard the first birdsong of morning, and shortly after that, she saw the quilt over her window lighten ever so slightly and she knew that dawn had come. Lottie sat up in bed, tired but knowing that it wasn't worth trying to sleep anymore. She put on

her glasses and wrapped the band of her father's watch twice around her wrist, buckling it securely. Then she went to the closet and picked out a pair of blue jeans, a long sleeved, purple t-shirt with a fox on the front, and a dark blue hooded sweatshirt. She put on her own shoes again and smoothed her red curls down a bit with her hands. Then Lottie eased her door open and slipped out into the hallway.

No one else was up yet. The house was silent except for soft snoring coming from behind one of the hall doors. Lottie crept downstairs, down the hall, and out the front door, through which Lottie and Death had come from the between place full of star dust. This time when the door opened, it led out to a grassy front yard hemmed in by trees, with a pale, gravel road leading out into the woods. She closed it softly behind her.

Outside the birdsong was almost raucous. The air was cold and wet, as though it might rain later. Lottie zipped her sweatshirt up and stuffed her hands into the kangaroo pockets in the front. Then she began walking, slowly, out into the woods. She avoided the gravel drive entirely, not wanting to make any noise that would awaken the house. Her heart pounded a little. Only yesterday, she wouldn't have dreamed of sneaking out of the house without telling anyone to go exploring in the woods, and now that was exactly what she was doing. But Lottie promised herself that she wouldn't go far and she would be back before anyone had time to worry about her. She wasn't running away, wasn't doing anything wrong. She just needed to be away from that house for a little while.

So Lottie walked, looking behind herself every so often to make sure she could still see the house and be able to get back. The house was painted white, so it was easy to see even as she got further away. The trees in these woods were old and broad. The canopy soared above her like a green ceiling. Very little light got through, and in the dawn light, it

was dim and hazy on the forest floor. Lottie watched over her shoulder as the last of Kin House disappeared between the tree trunks and then stopped. If she went any further, she might be lost.

Then the wind changed and she smelled water. Lottie knew if she could smell it, then it must be nearby—human noses weren't that good. She yearned to get to that water, whether it was a lake or a stream. It would be something familiar in a world that had suddenly become very strange. She looked over her shoulder, but the house was indeed already out of sight. Lottie bent down and picked up a few sticks from the forest floor. She shaped them into an arrow that pointed back toward the house. She stuck one stick into the dirt so that it stood up straight, so she'd be able to see it. Then she walked toward the smell of water, checking over her shoulder until she could hardly see her marker. Then she bent down and made another. She walked some more. This time, she found the source of the smell. It was a pond.

Lottie hesitated. She wanted to be near the pond, but Death had told her that the Nimetu had once been monsters of ponds and rivers, and she feared that they would somehow know that she was there if she came too close. A pair of ducks swam in the pond, dipping their heads down to lunge at little fish every now and then. They made ripples in the water so that it hardly reflected anything, and Lottie wondered if that would be enough to keep the Nimetu from being able to use it to see her. She rested her hand against the trunk of a nearby tree.

I only want to do a little fish watching, she thought. Fish watching isn't dangerous. I was just doing it with Dad and we were both fine.

Lottie took a step forward and then she heard it. Whispering. It was the same whispering that she'd heard outside her window the night before. She looked around herself, heart thudding in her ears, expecting to see monsters coming out from behind the trees at any moment. Then the ducks began quacking frantically and scurried out of the water and into the air, leaving the water's surface even more fractured than before. Lottie ducked behind the tree she'd been resting against. She knew now: the whispering was coming from the water.

With quick steps that were a lot louder than she might have wished, Lottie reached her second marker. She kicked it so no one, not human or monster, could use it before moving on. Then she found the first one again, destroyed it too, and went in the direction it had been pointing, running now. Soon she saw a glimpse of the old, white house through the trees. She ran faster. Then she broke into the little clearing surrounding the house.

Lottie was glad to see the house, and felt some of the panic leave her limbs, but she knew she wasn't safe, not really. No matter what Death and Gertie said, this place wasn't really, truly safe. The whispering might not mean the monsters had found her, but it meant that they could. If Lottie was going to rescue anyone, it had better be soon.

The front door opened as she was crossing the yard, revealing Gertie, this time in overalls and a paisley shirt. "Lottie," she called. "Where were you?"

Lottie jogged the last little ways to the door, head tucked and guilty. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did I worry you?"

"Not half as much as you worried Death," Gertie replied.

“Lottie!” Death came out from behind Gertie, eyes wide and dark hair tousled and un-combed. The fingers that gripped his scythe were white-knuckled. “Are you all right? Where did you go?”

“I’m sorry,” Lottie said again. “I just...I just went for a walk in the woods.”

“Without telling me?” Death demanded. He thudded down the stairs until he was on the grass only a few feet in front of Lottie. “Without taking anyone with you? Lottie, you cannot just leave like that!”

Lottie took a half step back. Despite looking like a child, Death didn’t seem like one then. When he’d first seen her, he’d looked scared and relieved, but now he looked furious. The corners of his mouth pulled down and his lips were a thin line. His dark brows gathered over his eyes. His scythe, tall and bright, looked especially sharp in the cloudy morning.

“I know,” Lottie said. “I’m sorry, Death. I didn’t mean to.”

Death seemed to realize that he was frightening her and shook his head. He took a step backwards too and set the butt of the scythe on the grass.

“You just cannot wander off like that,” he said again. “It is not safe.”

“No,” Lottie said. “It isn’t safe. Not even here.”

Chapter 6
In Which the Finder is Rude

“Why don’t you go wash up, sweetie?” Gertie said as Lottie came back inside. “Dale is making breakfast.”

Lottie nodded and walked down the hallway, not looking at Death. When she got to the bathroom, she saw that there was a toothbrush sitting inside a little plastic cup on the edge of the sink now, alongside a tube of toothpaste. Someone—probably Gertie, she decided—had written “LOTTIE” on the cup in black marker. She was glad to be able to brush her teeth, but Lottie’s stomach twinged at this evidence that, at least for now, she lived here.

Once she’d finished washing up, Lottie left the bathroom and returned to the kitchen. Dale was at the stove, while Gertie and Death sat at the table. The smells of eggs and bacon filled the room. Lottie’s stomach growled.

“Good morning, Lottie,” Dale said, smiling at her from over his shoulder. “What would you like for breakfast? I’m already making scrambled eggs and bacon for Gertie and myself, but I’m open to suggestions.”

“Eggs and bacon sound great,” Lottie said. “Thank you.”

“You bet.” Dale busied himself at the stove.

Lottie sat down next to Death. There was a long moment in which the only sound was the hissing of bacon from the stove.

“I hear you went on a walkabout this morning,” Dale said.

Lottie flinched, though Dale hadn’t sounded angry. Gertie reached across the table and put a hand on Lottie’s arm. Lottie looked up at her. The old woman was smiling in a

way Lottie knew was meant to be comforting, but only made her feel worse. Lottie glanced over at Death. He wasn't smiling.

"I heard whispering at my window," Lottie said, surprising herself. She'd meant to say she was sorry again.

"Whispering?" Death asked, looking concerned now, his dark brows furrowing. It was moments like this that Lottie could tell he wasn't really a boy, even though he looked like one. A boy would look scared.

Lottie nodded. "Late at night. When it was dark."

"Why didn't you come get me?" Death asked.

Lottie shrugged. "It went away. And...and I didn't want..."

"To bother us?" Gertie suggested.

Lottie shook her head.

"For it to be real?" Dale asked. He'd finished the eggs and was setting a plate down in front of Lottie.

Lottie looked up at him and nodded mutely. She was afraid if she spoke that she would start crying.

Dale sat down next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "It does take getting used to, doesn't it?"

Lottie nodded and looked down at her plate. She was hardly hungry now.

"But I do not understand," Death said. "If you were so frightened last night, why would you go out alone this morning? Why not ask me to come with you, at least?"

Lottie looked at him and, for the first time that morning, made eye contact. His mouth still looked a little angry, his eyes looked sad.

“I don’t know,” Lottie said. “I guess I wanted to be alone. I didn’t want to be reminded of any of this. And you’re....Well....”

She glanced up at his scythe, which leaned against the wall behind him, gleaming in the light. Death turned around and saw the scythe too and then turned back to Lottie, nodding.

“But you got back on your own,” Dale said, smiling. He got back up and went to retrieve two more plates of food. “That’s pretty impressive, right? These woods are easy to get lost in.”

“I made markers so I’d know how to get back,” Lottie said. She hesitated before continuing, waited for Dale to bring the rest of the food and to sit down. “I found a pond. I heard more whispering there.”

Everyone froze and slowly turned to look at her.

“Did you see anything?” Death asked.

Lottie shook her head. “No. I ran back here.”

“And the markers you made?” Death asked, even more tensely now. “Are they still out there?”

“No, I destroyed them as I went,” Lottie replied.

Everyone relaxed, sinking back into their chairs a little. Dale coughed.

“Well, eat up, Lottie,” he said. “Before your eggs get cold.”

Obediently, Lottie scooped up a forkful of eggs and guided them to her mouth. She chewed while she thought about her next question. She didn’t really want to hear the answer to it, because she thought she knew already, but her father had raised her to ask questions and she was finding the habit difficult to break.

“Shouldn’t I have done something else?” she asked, after she’d swallowed. “I’m supposed to be a Sentinel, right? I’m supposed to be able to fight monsters. But I ran.”

“And a good thing, too,” Gertie said. “If they’d seen you, it would have given away where you were. And you aren’t ready to fight, yet.”

Lottie resisted the urge to point out how obvious that was. She’d never gotten into a single fight in her whole life—not a real one. She’d been in shouting matches, and she’d been shoved and done some shoving of her own, especially when she was littler. But she’d never been in a *fight*, not really.

“First you need your bow and quiver,” Death said.

“My what?”

“Every Sentinel has them,” Death said. “They are passed down from generation to generation. They are magical weapons. Your mother will have hidden yours somewhere. That is why a Finder is coming here—to find your bow so you can begin to fight back.”

Lottie nodded, though since she didn’t know how to use a bow, she wasn’t sure how helpful that would really be. But at the mention of her mother, she knew she had to have it anyway. She didn’t have much from her mother. Whether or not she knew how to use a bow and arrow, she did know that she wanted them, if they had really been held by her mother’s hands at one time.

“And, furthermore,” Dale added, “I think those were excellent Sentinel instincts you demonstrated when you ran back to the house.”

Lottie had another forkful of eggs in her mouth and looked up at him in surprise. “What do you mean?” she asked, around the eggs.

“You knew you did not have the advantage then,” he said. “You knew it was a fight you could not win, so you made a tactical retreat. And you made sure that you could not be followed by destroying your markers.”

“I guess,” Lottie said, going back to her eggs. It had still felt like running away to her.

By the time she got to her bacon, they all heard the sound of a truck engine outside. The driveway up to the house was gravel and in the formerly still air, the crunching of gravel under tires seemed extremely loud. It drowned out the birdsong.

“That’ll be them,” Dale said. “They’re early.”

“Good,” Death said as they all stood up. He turned to Lottie. “Come meet the Finder. I think you two should get along.”

They all filed up the hallway and out the front door. The truck driving towards them was large and what wasn’t rusty was a dark green. The driver parked it on the grass next to the road. Lottie saw that the driver was a man about her father’s age and in the seat beside him was a boy about her own age. They both got out of the truck.

“You’re early,” called Gertie, as she and Dale walked down the front steps to meet them.

“We made better time than expected,” the man replied. “Sylvester Found us short cuts along the way.”

Dale shook the man’s hand and slapped the boy on the shoulder in the way boys do when they’re pleased to see each other. Gertie shook the man’s hand too, but petted the boy’s hair instead of slapping his shoulder. Lottie glanced at Death, and then they walked down the steps as well.

“Lottie,” Gertie said when they came together, “this is Cass and his son, Sylvester. Sylvester is the best Finder on the continent. He’s going to help you find your bow.”

Lottie looked the pair over. The father was tall, broad-shouldered, and had very dark skin and close-cropped black hair. His grin was bright and cheerful. His son looked like he would resemble his father very much when he grew up. He was taller than Lottie and Death, and he had his father’s dark skin. However, where his father smiled, this boy glared. When Lottie offered her hand to shake, Sylvester turned that glare on her.

“Or I could just Find the Nimetu and we wouldn’t have to bother with the bow,” Sylvester said.

“Sylvester,” Cass said, glaring himself now. “We’ve been through this.”

“And it’s still stupid,” Sylvester said. He pointed at Lottie. “Come on—look at her! Does she look like a Sentinel to you?”

“Well, this is going well,” Death said, but he wasn’t smiling.

Sylvester turned his glare on Death. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“That’s Death,” Lottie said. The boy turned to her, eyes narrow with doubt, then looked back at Death. Lottie continued, feeling bold with knowledge and angry enough to gloat about it, “Well, actually he’s both death and life. They’re just two sides to the same coin. But right now he’s Death—see the scythe?”

Sylvester turned his eyes to the tall scythe Death held in his left hand, towering over all three of them. His eyes went a little wide.

“And I’m Lottie,” she continued. “And I am so a Sentinel.”

“Well, are you the best Sentinel?” Sylvester demanded.

“I’m the *only* Sentinel,” Lottie snapped back. “The only one that didn’t get captured or killed, anyway.”

“That don’t make you the best,” Sylvester said. “That just makes you a last resort. I am the best!”

“Sylvester—” Cass said, but Lottie cut him off.

“The best at what?” she yelled. “At being a jerk?”

“Lottie—” Gertie said.

“No!” Sylvester shouted back. “I’m the best Finder. I could Find the Nimetu myself—and way faster than you could. Faster than anyone could.”

“The way I hear it, they’re in every mirror on the planet,” Lottie snapped. “Basically *anyone* can find them. So big whoop!”

Sylvester’s face distorted with rage so it looked hard and strange, like a mask rather than a face. Lottie would have laughed if she hadn’t been so angry. Sylvester opened his mouth to yell something else, but Cass clamped his large hand over it.

“That’s enough, Sylvester,” he shouted.

Sylvester twisted out of his grasp and shouted at his father, “I hate you!” Then he ran into the house through the open door.

Then there was quiet again. No birds sang this time. Lottie supposed all the shouting had frightened them away.

“So,” Death said ruefully. “That was the Finder. He finds things that are lost or that other people cannot see on their own.”

Lottie turned to look at Death. He was looking at her, smiling slightly, looking a little haggard. Lottie could tell he was trying to lighten the mood. She tried to smile, but her heart was still pounding with anger and her face was still hot.

“I’m sorry about him,” Cass said. “He’s a good kid, but sometimes he has these moods. He’ll cool down after a while, and then we can talk to him again.”

“And how long is a while?” Lottie asked, and her voice sounded angrier than she’d meant it to. Her face got even hotter and she looked down at the ground. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

There was another pause, this one shorter. Lottie caught movement at the edge of her vision and looked up to see Cass stepping toward her and holding out his hand, like she was a grown up.

“It’s good to meet you, Lottie,” he said. Lottie shook his hand. “I’m a Mender, which means I can always fix things when they’re broken.” He said that with great pride, as though he couldn’t have been happier if he’d been born the king of the whole world. “Well, anything except for my son’s moods, anyway. I’ve never met a Sentinel before. It’s quite an honor.”

Lottie revised her first ideas about how alike Cass and Sylvester were. They might look similar, but Cass was all good will and energy where his son was bitterness and temper. Lottie found herself wishing it was the father, rather than the son, who was supposed to help her find her bow. At the very least, she hoped that this big, happy man would be able to convince his son to cooperate at all.

“Oh,” Lottie said. “Thank you. Um. This is Death.” She gestured with her free hand.

Cass released her hand to shake Death's with great enthusiasm. "Hello," he said, grinning. "I didn't really expect to meet you for a while yet, but it's good to meet you all the same. I do have to admit though, I thought you'd be taller."

"Sometimes I am," Death replied.

"Well, let's all get inside," Dale said. "Are you hungry? Maybe if we make some cooking smells, Sylvester will come out of wherever he's holed himself up in."

They filed back into the house. Cass, it turned out, was hungry and he was very enthusiastic about all the options Dale presented him with. Soon the kitchen was a-clatter once again with the sounds of eggs being made, ham being cooked, and pancake batter being mixed. Gertie and Dale told Cass about Lottie's father and Joyce, and Lottie was happy enough to let them tell it. She glanced at the doorway to the kitchen frequently, hoping that Sylvester would appear.

They didn't have time for all this waiting, she thought. They didn't have time for the Finder's temper tantrum. It might have been a pretty bad morning, but now that she knew that she was to get her mother's magical bow and quiver, she wanted them as soon as possible. And if they would really make her able to fight the Nimetu, she wanted them sooner than possible. She did *not* want to wait for some brat to get his temper under control—for him to decide he felt like helping her. She began tapping her foot.

Lottie got up from her seat at the table. She mentioned quietly to Gertie that she was going to use the bathroom and then walked out into the hall. At the door of the bathroom, she stopped, but didn't go in.

If I was pouting in a strange house, Lottie thought, where would I hide?

She decided not to bother with the rooms on the ground floor. If she were hiding, she'd have run up the stairs. Lottie set her feet carefully on the stairs, trying not to make any noise. She didn't want Sylvester to hear her and find a better hiding place. At the top of the stairs she paused again, sighed, and decided to just check each room one after the other.

She opened the first door on the right. Inside was a big bed with quilts and a closet with open doors that revealed the plaid shirts Dale wore. The heavy curtains on the windows had been pulled back to let the sunlight in. Lottie realized this was Dale and Gertie's bedroom, remembering it now as the room from which the snoring had been coming that morning, and felt bad for peeking. She swept over the whole room with her eyes and, not seeing the Finder, closed the door again. The next door on the right led to a room with a perfectly made bed, empty wardrobe, and a bare window. There was an extra blanket folded up on the bed with a handful of nails and a hammer next to it. Lottie wondered if Dale and Gertie had been preparing this room for Sylvester or Cass. A glance around the room showed that the Finder wasn't there either. Lottie sighed. Of course he wouldn't be in the room that had clearly been set aside for him.

That gave her an idea—one she didn't like. She crossed the hallway to her own door, skipping the linen closet at the end of the hall. She was angry at the idea that Sylvester might have taken her room, even though it wasn't her room, not really. She'd only slept there once and it wasn't her home. But it was the closest thing to hers that she had here and the Finder was already ruining everything.

She grabbed the knob and pushed, but she couldn't move the door. Now she was sure that Sylvester was in there. Lottie had already noticed the lack of a lock on the inside

of her room. He must have pushed something up against the door to block it. She tried the knob again, with the same result. Then Lottie heard the sounds of feet on the floor on the other side of the door.

“Sylvester,” Lottie shouted, pounding on the door with her fist. “Get out here. Stop pouting! We have to get moving. Don’t you understand how important this is?”

“Oh, go away!” Sylvester called. He sounded like he was only inches from the door. “Leave me alone!”

“Get out of my room!” Lottie cried. “That’s my room! Get your own!”

“Really?” Sylvester shouted. “How do you know it’s yours? I don’t see your name on it.”

“I said get out!”

“Lottie?” Cass was standing at the other end of the hall. Lottie looked and saw that Death, Gertie, and Dale were with him, staring at her.

“He’s in my room,” Lottie cried. “He’s locked himself in.”

“And you figured the best way to get him out was to yell at him?” Dale asked.

Lottie opened her mouth to reply, but couldn’t form the words. She had come up to try to talk some sense into the Finder, but seeing that he’d taken her room had just made her so angry. She tried to think of a way to explain how unfair it all was so that the grown-ups would understand, but before she could, she heard scraping from inside her room. The door opened and Sylvester stepped out into the hall, brushing past Lottie as though she wasn’t there.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he said, smiling at the grown-ups and Death. “Let’s go, already! We have a whole world to save.”

He marched down the hall, the picture of cooperativeness. Everyone just stared at him. The adults looked relieved. Death looked confused. When Sylvester had nearly reached the stairs, he turned around to look at Lottie.

“Come on, Lottie,” he said, smirking. “We’re kind of on a schedule here.”

With that, everyone went back down the stairs. Lottie stood in the hall, fuming. This had been his plan all along, she realized. He’d meant to provoke her so that he could look like the good one. Lottie hated him. She clenched her fists at her sides and, determined to act more mature than Sylvester had, she followed the rest down the stairs. She hoped very much that after Sylvester found her bow, that he would go home and stop helping.

She wanted help. But not his.

Chapter 7
In Which Lottie Gets Left Out

Lottie sat in the kitchen with Gertie, fuming. Everyone else was in the living room across the hall from the kitchen with the door closed, while Sylvester tried to figure out where Lottie's mother's bow was. Sylvester had refused to let Lottie watch him while he worked, no matter how much she and the others argued with him. Eventually, Gertie had suggested that she and Lottie wait in the kitchen "to save time." Lottie had agreed, but grudgingly, and she sat with her back to the stove, staring across the hall at the closed door.

At first, Gertie had tried talking to her, but Lottie couldn't make herself chat in the kitchen while there was important work that she was not allowed to see going on in the next room. After only a few attempts, Gertie had fallen silent, and she and Lottie sat together in the kitchen, staring at the closed door. Then Gertie got up, picked up a remote control from the counter and turned on a little TV before removing the dish towel from over its screen.

With a sigh, Lottie shifted in her seat so she could see the little television more easily, leaving the door on the other side of the hall in the corner of her eye. Gertie came back to her chair and sat down while she flipped through the channels with the remote. Flashes of different shows took up the screen and then disappeared to be replaced by something else. It reminded Lottie of how Death had changed from shape to shape in the woods the day before.

"Wait," Lottie said. She'd heard a familiar name a channel or two ago and it had made her heart jump. "Go back. Please."

Gertie flipped back a channel. It was about wildebeest. They were stampeding across the plain. Gertie flipped back another channel and it turned out to be a news station.

Usually Lottie hated to watch the news; it was boring. This time, however, she could hardly tear her eyes from the screen.

“A local family is missing as of yesterday evening,” said the well-dressed anchor. “Police say the kitchen was burned and the hallway wall was stained, but there was no other damage and nothing, except for the family that lived there, was taken. No one has seen Benjamin or Joyce Spinner, nor their daughter Charlotte, since yesterday.”

Lottie swallowed down the lump in her throat and stroked the smooth face of her father’s watch with her thumb. Gertie reached over and took Lottie’s hand in hers.

“Police refused to comment when asked if this disappearance could be linked to the string of deaths and kidnappings that began three days ago,” the anchor continued. “Two dozen women are confirmed kidnapped, and nearly one hundred dead, with both numbers rising as families and loved ones file more reports. The women span all ages and come from all walks of life. There are never any witnesses to the crimes. The only connection, at least among the dead, is that they were all attacked in their bathrooms or other rooms with large mirrors. The only thing we know about the attackers is that there must be dozens of them as well. The FBI is now involved and there are murmurings that this string of attacks was world-wide. Could this be a new, global mafia or gang? No demands have been issued and no ransom note received, which has led some to say this is a gang of serial killers. Anyone with information about these crimes, please call the hotline number at the bottom of the screen.”

“It takes a lot for the regular people to take notice,” Gertie said, shaking her head. “This is a bad one.”

“The police can’t really do anything, can they?” Lottie asked.

“No, not really,” Gertie said. She squeezed Lottie’s hand. “That’s why we need Sentinels like you. You have what the police don’t.”

“What?”

“Why, your abilities as a Sentinel, of course,” Gertie replied.

“But I don’t know what my abilities are,” Lottie said. Her lower lip trembled but she felt anger fizzing under her cheeks.

“You will,” Gertie said. “Once you get your bow and arrows, it’ll start to work itself out. That’s how these things sometimes work. It would have been nice if Sylvester had let you watch him perform his trance, of course—your abilities as a Sentinel are probably similar to his abilities as a Finder in many ways.”

“Probably?”

Gertie turned to her and smiled a little shakily. “I don’t really know how the abilities of a Sentinel work,” she said. “Death knows more, but what we really need is another Sentinel to ask, and we don’t have one. But Death is sure that getting your bow—the one your mother would have given you—is the first step towards getting things to make more sense.”

She changed the channel again. Lottie sighed. The anchor had switched to talking about politics anyway. Lottie was used to asking grown-ups questions they didn’t know the answers to—it happened in school all the time. Sometimes it even happened when she talked to her father. But that was usually just things she wanted to know the answers to and either the grown-up would look it up and get back to her, or Lottie would go to the library or to the computer and look it up herself. This was different. These were questions she

needed to know the answers to and there was no place to go look up the answers. It was becoming frustrating.

Lottie stared at the closed door to the living room and glared. Some of her answers were behind that door—or at least the beginnings of answers. That Sylvester would refuse to let her watch him do the Finding was infuriating. Lottie pulled her feet under her and started to stand up from her chair, thinking she could at least go listen at the keyhole.

Then the door opened, and Cass stepped out, grinning. Death and Sylvester came out right behind him, talking to each other. Lottie felt a twinge of jealousy. First her room and now Death? Couldn't Sylvester leave her things alone?

“He found it,” Cass called.

“Where?” Lottie asked.

“It's in a bank vault,” Sylvester said, smiling in a way that made Lottie want to slug him. “It's inside one of the safety deposit boxes.”

“Then I hope you also found the key to the box,” Gertie said.

“Unnecessary,” Death said. “I can get Lottie into the vault and open the box.”

“I'm going too,” Sylvester said.

“Why?” Lottie demanded. “You already told us where it is.”

“I won't know which box it's in unless I go there myself. So I have to go too.”

Lottie clenched her fists, but said nothing. The faster he did his part, the faster he would leave, she thought.

“I will take both of you,” Death said. He stared at his scythe, spinning it around, so the blade on top looked like a filmy, blurry umbrella. “Once we are there, we will have to move quickly. They will be watching for Lottie and I know the vault the Finder described.

It is made of stainless steel, polished mirror bright. They will know the moment we enter the vault. And I do not think they will waste any time in coming to intercept us.”

Lottie noticed that Death didn't bother to say who “they” were. It was obvious. Death stopped spinning his scythe and turned to Sylvester.

“How long will it take you to find the correct box?” he asked.

“I...I don't know,” Sylvester said, looking worried for the first time since he got out of the truck. “I don't think very long.”

Death nodded. “Then we will go now.”

“So soon?” Cass asked, grin gone. “Don't you think you should prepare more?”

“Daaaaad,” Sylvester whined.

“Or I should come with you,” Cass said.

“I am afraid you would not be of much help,” Death said. “Lottie must come because she will be able to wield the bow. Your son has to come to find the bow. I have to go, of course, because otherwise the other two cannot get there and back. But a Mender, I think, would not be helpful...even if we are attacked.”

“But...” Cass began.

“He's right,” Dale said. “They should go without us and they should go now. It's Sunday. No bank is open on Sunday, so they'll be alone, which is probably best. Try not to trip any alarms.”

“I never trip alarms,” Death said, smiling.

Chapter 8
In Which the Vault is Dark and Full of Reflections

Death led Lottie and Sylvester to the front door of the house. Lottie's stomach hurt and she knew she was afraid. Only three days ago, her father and Joyce wouldn't let her go farther than the park across the street by herself or with just other kids. Now she was going to break into a bank and none of the grown-ups were even trying to stop her. She had often wished that she was allowed to do more things by herself, but now that it was happening, it felt strange and scary. If Death weren't coming along, Lottie wasn't sure she would have been able to make herself go.

Death paused with his hand on the door knob and looked back at Lottie and Sylvester. "Stay close," he told them. Then he looked farther back at the grown-ups. "We will be back soon."

He turned the knob and opened the door. On the other side was swirling clouds of stardust. Sylvester gasped, and Lottie smiled to hear it. Death took a step and Lottie followed, right at his heel. Sylvester came a step after her, hurrying. She heard a soft click of a door closing behind them this time, and looked, but the front door of the house was gone. Now there was only stardust. Sylvester was looking around with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth.

"Where are we?" he asked, as they walked.

"A between place," Death replied, just as he had when Lottie had asked.

"How...how long do we have to stay here?" he asked, and his voice was high and tight.

"Not long," Death said.

Sylvester continued to look around and Lottie could see him getting more and more frantic by the moment. Lottie felt a little bit glad to see him so afraid, and then felt bad, though whether she felt bad that he was afraid or that she was glad, she wasn't quite sure.

"Is it safe for us here?" Sylvester asked.

"For brief periods of time, it is," Death said.

"We're safe from Nimetu though," Lottie said.

Sylvester didn't look comforted. He walked with exaggerated care, like he was afraid that any moment he would trip and fall down into the stardust. Lottie looked down. She could feel something like ground underneath her feet, like walking on squishy cushions, but she couldn't see anything. She expected to feel frightened as she looked down and saw nothing to stand on, but she didn't. Below her the stardust swirled gently, like sediment in water did when she tossed a rock into a lake, except this sparkled. She didn't doubt Death when he said this wasn't a safe place for live humans for very long, but she had a difficult time seeing why. She felt safe here. She could watch the swirling clouds for hours.

"We are here," Death said.

Lottie looked up and Death was standing in front of a dark spot, like a hole in space. Sylvester came to a stop next to Lottie, shifting from foot to foot, hands clenched into fists.

"On the other side of this opening is the bank vault," Death continued. "We must move as quickly as possible. Sylvester will find the right box, I will open it, and Lottie will get the bow and arrows. Then we will leave back through the bank vault door. It will be dark in the vault. Wait a moment, and I will create some light. Are you both ready?"

“But if the Nimetu get to us first, you can fight them, right?” Lottie asked, suddenly frightened again. “If we aren’t fast enough, I mean.”

“I can fend them off,” Death said. “But they are neither alive nor dead. I cannot kill them. Only a Sentinel can. That is why we must move swiftly.”

Lottie nodded and swallowed. It hadn’t occurred to her that Death might not be able to protect her. Death led them through.

Lottie found herself standing in the mouth of the bank vault door. Death’s scythe began to glow a cool blue. Lottie looked behind herself. The swirling stardust was gone, replaced by a hallway with granite walls and floors. There were no windows. Lottie guessed they must be underground. Then she noticed tiny red lights on what Lottie realized must be security cameras.

“Death...” she said, gesturing.

“Do not worry,” he replied, after looking to see where she pointed. “Cameras never notice me, and as long as you do not make any sudden movements or do any shouting, they will not notice you either.”

Lottie nodded and turned back to the vault, which was lit with the same faint red glow of tiny camera lights. Death stood on her left, and Sylvester on her right. Death stepped inside the vault. Now Lottie noticed its walls. They shone in the light from the scythe. The tiny doors were bluish silver in the scythe’s light, but wherever a door wasn’t, the metal had been polished and Lottie could see her reflection and the reflections of Death and Sylvester. She wondered why her mother would have chosen a bank with a mirror vault to hide her bow in. If it had been someone else’s mother, Lottie would have assumed the

woman simply hadn't been very smart, but she felt awful thinking that about her own mother, even if she didn't remember her.

"Come in," Death said. "Sylvester, find the right box. Quickly."

Lottie and Sylvester came inside. Sylvester immediately went to the walls of little doors, brushing his fingertips along them. Lottie stopped a few paces inside. Death went past her and closed the huge, round, vault door as though it were no larger or heavier than a normal door. It shut with a heavy, metal clang, startling Sylvester.

"Did it lock?" he asked, sounding panicked again.

"Yes," Death replied. "I can open it anyway. Find the bow." He turned to Lottie. "Watch the walls for Nimetu. Let us know if you see or sense anything."

Lottie nodded and began scanning the reflections. Her heart pounded in her chest. Everything glowed a grayish blue, and the reflection of herself that stared back at her looked as frightened as she felt. Sylvester continued to brush his fingers along the little doors. He was muttering to himself now, but Lottie couldn't tell what he was saying. She wished he would hurry up.

Then Lottie caught movement in one of the reflections. It was fast, like a dragonfly going past her head, seen only out of the corner of her eye. Then she felt it. She felt eyes on her from the other side of the reflection. Another flash of movement, this time from the other side. She spun to look, but she was too late. Her heart pounded so hard now that it was like it was throwing itself against her ribcage, trying to get out. This was like every single time she had ever seen anything in a mirror or in the darkness, except that this time she couldn't try to tell herself that it wasn't real.

"Death—" she began.

“Found you....” came a voice.

Lottie looked. Now there were shapes in the reflections. It was still just the three of them inside the vault, but in the reflection, there were countless moving shapes. Some were more distinct, human-like shapes—others more remote and further away. They were all the little hazy; the polished metal of the walls weren't quite as clear as real mirrors would be. Lottie strained her eyes to see the monsters better, though a huge part of her said not to look, to close her eyes. The human-like shapes all moved strangely for humans, with quick, fluid steps, like spiders. One of the closest monsters placed its palm against the reflection, like it was only on the other side of a window, and Lottie noticed that it had too many joints in its fingers.

“Found you, little Sentinel,” it said and it grinned. Its grin was too wide. It had too many teeth.

“Sylvester, find the bow!” she shouted.

She turned, but Sylvester wasn't running his hands along the walls of the vault anymore. He was staring at the reflections and trembling. Death was faced away from him, turned towards the far wall, his scythe held like a fighting staff.

“Sylvester!” Lottie shouted again. He didn't move.

Lottie turned to a little table next to her. She picked up a box of forms and threw it at Sylvester with all her strength. It didn't hit him, but it landed beside him on the floor with an almost deafening clatter. He leapt into the air, hands up to shield his head.

“Find the bow,” Lottie shouted.

He looked at her then, eyes wide. He nodded and went back to the drawers. Lottie returned to look at the walls. The Nimetu—Lottie knew it was them, even though she

couldn't see them properly—were even more numerous now, and many were darting back and forth along the edges of the reflections.

Then Lottie felt something new. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and every inch of her skin felt prickly. Her heart stopped pounding and she felt still. It was a totally unfamiliar feeling, but she *knew* what that feeling meant.

“They’re in the bank,” she said. Her heart began to pound again. “Not just one of them. There’s lots.”

Death ran to her side of the vault, facing the door. There was a great pounding sound: Thud! Thud! Thud! Each thud reverberated through the door. Lottie could see it tremble.

“They’re trying to get in,” she said. “Can they?”

Death nodded. “I believe so. They are very strong.”

“I found it!” Sylvester called. “It’s in this one. Hurry!”

Death and Lottie left the vault door and ran to Sylvester’s side. Sylvester was pointing to one of the larger boxes near the floor: number 6123. Death crouched, and touched the tip of his scythe to the tiny lock at the top of the door. For a moment, nothing happened, but then there was a click—barely audible over the pounding at the vault door. Death reached down and pulled out the drawer, letting it fall to the floor with a clatter and a slosh.

The bottom of the box was covered by scummy, smelly water in which a piece of driftwood floated. For a moment, they all stared at it in silence. Lottie could hardly hear the pounding at the vault door anymore and it felt as though her heart had stopped altogether. The smell of pond water floated up to her from the box. She recognized it from

fish watching with her father. But there were no fish in the few inches of water inside the box. No waterstriders. And no bow.

“I don’t...” Sylvester stared at the box as though he’d forgotten what it was or who he was or how gravity worked. “It was here. It was supposed to be here.”

The Nimetu in the reflections laughed and pointed, showing too many teeth in their too-wide smiles. Death straightened up and glared at them.

“They tricked you,” he said. “This is a trap. Quick, we must get to the door—”

Lottie looked back at the door. It was dented. She could see it beginning to bend under the assault of the Nimetu. She wondered how many more blows it would take to break it down. The Nimetu behind the reflections laughed and laughed.

“I’m not going near that door!” Sylvester shouted.

“I can only open a door to the between place from an actual door,” Death said.

“What about in the woods yesterday?” Lottie asked.

“Trees are different,” Death said. “They function as gateways to all kinds of places, but in here I need a door!”

“What about the doors to some of these boxes?” Sylvester asked, taking a few steps back, farther away from the vault door.

“Neither of you can fit through doors this small,” Death insisted. “Now—”

The vault door groaned horribly and for the first time in her life, Lottie heard the sound of metal tearing. For an awful moment, they all stood still as the door to the vault sank down on its hinges and slowly fell away, landing on the floor outside the vault with a deep, rumbling clang. Beyond the door stood a dozen Nimetu. Their teeth shone blue in the light from the scythe.

“Got you,” said one in the front.

Sirens blared and lights flashed, as the bank’s security alarms were finally triggered. Now everything was a confusing jumble of noise and lights. Lottie trembled.

Chapter 9
In Which There is Little Hope of Escape

The Nimetu advanced into the vault, slowly. The combined blue light of Death's scythe and the flashing red lights of the sirens lit the vault chaotically now, causing shadows to jump and flicker. In the reflections around them, the rest of the monsters cheered and gloated. Their many jointed fingers danced through the darkness and their smiles spread much too widely across their faces, exposing far too many teeth. The Nimetu in the vault did not celebrate so wildly, though they did grin their horrible, too-wide grins.

Lottie could see them clearly for the first time now that they stood before her, rather than being hazily reflected to her. They did look almost human. Or, Lottie thought, they resembled humans in the same way tigers resembled housecats. They had the right general shape to be humans, but that was where the resemblance ended. Their arms were too long and had two or three sets of elbows and their long, long legs had two or three sets of knees. Lottie couldn't even count the numbers of knuckles in their fingers. They didn't stand straight. Their legs and arms were always bent slightly, as though ready to spring. Tatters of clothing in blacks and grays and midnight blues hung off their torsos and limbs like weeds pulled up from the bottom of a lake. Their grinning mouths nearly cut their too long, too thin faces in two. Dark hair hung heavy down their backs, as though wet, with tendrils sticking to the pale, pale skin of their faces and necks. Their eyes glimmered, overly bright, in the blue light of Death's scythe, like they were filled with too much water. They seemed to be neither men nor women.

She could smell them too. They smelled wet and rotten, like water that pooled too shallow and dirty, where things died and decayed. It didn't smell exactly like real water—

there was something fake about it. Like the way air fresheners that say they smell of forests or clean laundry always smell a little fake, a little wrong.

The Nimetu moved carefully but intently into the vault, taking a couple of quick steps, and then holding perfectly, perfectly still, their over-bright eyes flicking from her to Death and back again. Lottie wondered if this was a how a fly felt when it was trapped in a web and the spider was moving slowly closer.

“Come quietly, Sentinel. Come quietly and we will let your friends go,” said the closest monster, loudly to be heard over the blare of the siren.

It was taller than the rest and its fingers had more joints. When it spoke, the other Nimetu stopped and their eyes flickered from her to it a few times. Lottie decided it must be the leader.

“I don’t believe you,” Lottie shouted.

The monsters cackled and their mouths opened very wide so Lottie could see their sharp teeth and their narrow, pink tongues. The leader spoke again: “You’re trapped. Stuck in a web. Stuck fast. What choice do you have?”

“We will fight you,” Death called. Out of the corner of her eye, Lottie saw him come up beside her, scythe held out in front of him, still glowing blue.

“Death,” Sylvester whispered, barely audible over the siren. “I found another door. Come here.”

Lottie felt Death turn to look more than she saw him. She couldn’t take her eyes off the monsters before her. She knew it. She knew it the same way she knew that they were coming before they began to knock down the door. If she kept staring at them, if she held

them with her eyes, they had to be careful. They couldn't just attack. She could slow them with her eyes, she hoped, long enough.

The leader shifted from foot to foot, its many knees bending and straightening. It stared Lottie in the eyes. She stared back. Her heart pounded, her hair stood on end, but she stared back.

"We'll release your parents too," it called, wheedling. "We will....If you come quietly."

Lottie was about to say again that she didn't believe it, but then thought better. "How do I even know they're still alive?" she asked instead.

The leader grinned, smug, and waved at the nearest wall of reflective metal. Lottie turned her attention to the wall, but kept the leader in the corner of her eye. The Nimetu that stood close to that spot backed away and the scene behind them changed, swirled. Then Lottie could see her parents, hazy, but there. They were curled up, like babies in the womb, and their eyes were closed. They shifted up and down gently, like they were floating.

"See?" the leader said and Lottie turned her stare back on it. The monsters had been slowly creeping forward, but they stopped in their tracks as Lottie turned. The leader continued: "They're alive, they are. Safe in the pocket worlds inside the Mirror World, sleeping away."

Lottie glanced back at the wall just in time to see her father open his eyes a little. Then he saw her and his eyes went wide. He opened his mouth as if to say her name, and then he was gone, and the Nimetu were back.

"They won't stay alive forever, though, no they will not," the leader continued. "Make your choice, little Sentinel."

“I’m going to save them,” Lottie shouted, and was pleased that she sounded braver than she felt. “I’m going to come for them. And they had better still be alive when I get there.”

“Or what?” the leader hissed.

Lottie thought fast. “Or else,” she said, and tried to sound menacing.

The Nimetu roiled. Some snarled. Others cackled. It was a wall of teeth and extra joints.

The leader gestured to two of the followers. “Get her!” it cried.

The two hesitated, looking at each other. Lottie hoped they would argue, but they didn’t. They scuttled forward, eyes narrowed and teeth barred.

Lottie turned her stare on them. She stared at them like she had often wished she could do to the older girls who bullied her at school. She stared like she knew all their weaknesses—every chink in their armor. She stared like she was a bad thing that was about to happen to them.

The two followers slowed. They stopped. They exchanged glances, bright eyes flicking from her to each other to the leader and back. Lottie counted the seconds. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi.... They glared, as though they didn’t want to be still, but couldn’t quite make themselves move forward.

Four Mississippi, five Mississippi, six Mississippi, seven Mississip— One took half a step and she stared at it harder. It paused again, still glaring, still resentful.

“I said get her!” shrieked the leader.

Lottie turned her stare on it, but it was too late. She’d lost it—whatever power she’d had over them just then. The two followers skittered closer.

Then Death was in front of her, holding his scythe between him and the monsters. They hissed and took a step back again, flinching away from the scythe's sharp, glowing edge.

"I have opened a door," Death said without turning to look at her. "Run! Follow Sylvester."

Lottie ran to where she saw Sylvester crouching at the far side of the vault. He waved her over and then wriggled through the door of a large box near the floor. The big drawer that had been in it lay discarded beyond. Lottie could see the swirling stardust just on the other side. The door was just big enough for Sylvester to squeeze through and Lottie knew she wouldn't have a much easier time of it.

A hiss of rage brought her attention back to the Nimetu. Death had wounded one and it was snarling, almost as though it was more angry than in pain. It clutched its upper arm, but bluish water dripped onto the back vault floor anyway. They were only a few feet from her now. Death was quickly retreating as he kept countering their attacks, trying to make sure none got past him.

"Lottie," Death called. "Go through the door!"

Lottie took another step towards the door and crouched down, ready to duck inside. Just then, one of the Nimetu—the leader—broke past Death and lunged at her. She ducked down, into the door, heart in her throat. The door was taller than it was wide, and Lottie had to turn sideways to get through. At any moment, she expected to feel a hand close around her ankle. The blare of the siren filled her ears, panicking her even worse. She caught her shoulder on the doorframe once, freed it, and pushed forward, scraping her arm in the process.

And then she was in the between place. A few feet away, Sylvester knelt, panting. She looked back at the doorway and nearly screamed. A hand with many-jointed fingers reached through and Lottie saw how sharp the fingernails were, like claws. She scrambled back, but they grazed her leg, ripping her pants. Then there was a flash of blue and a shriek. The hand was withdrawn and Death came barreling through the door, which shut and disappeared.

Chapter 10 In Which Lottie and Sylvester Team Up

For a few moments, they all knelt, breathing heavily. After the noise of the vault, the silence of the stardust was almost deafening. Lottie shifted so she was sitting cross-legged and held her head in her hands. This didn't make sense. None of it. That wasn't supposed to happen.

"Why wasn't it there?" Sylvester asked. His voice was small and sharp with pleading.

"It seems that the Nimetu know more magic than I thought," Death said. "They knew we would be searching for the bow and they set a trap, assuming we would be using the services of a Finder. They must have been observing this world for a long time to do this."

Lottie took her head out of her hands. "Why didn't Sylvester know it was a trap? Why couldn't he tell the difference between a chunk of wood and a bow?"

Sylvester glowered but didn't say anything.

"It was not his fault," Death said. "It was magic."

"I'll do another Finding," Sylvester said, standing. "They won't trick me again."

Lottie and Death nodded and stood. Death led them through the swirling stardust. Lottie couldn't help thinking about how she had stared down the Nimetu. She'd held them at bay with the force of her glare. How?

"Death?" she asked. "I stopped them by just looking at them back there."

Death nodded and looked at her with that lopsided smile he did. His dark hair was messy and Lottie saw that his black t-shirt was ripped near the hem. It looked like claw marks.

“I told you that you were a Sentinel,” Death said. “Now do you believe me?”

“But how does it work?” Lottie asked.

Death shrugged. “I am not sure. I assume it is some kind of inherited instinct. Your instinct is to stare them down and theirs is to hesitate when you do so. Remember, they have had generations upon generations to learn to be afraid of Sentinels.”

“But I’m just a kid,” Lottie said. “And we didn’t even find my mother’s bow.”

“True,” Death said. “But instincts are instincts. Still...”

“What?” Lottie asked.

“Well, we probably cannot depend on that working so well again,” Death said. “Just because the instinct is strong does not mean the Nimetu will not fight it better next time. Instincts can be fought.”

“So we really do need the bow,” Lottie said.

“Yes,” Death replied. “We do very badly.”

“I’ll find it this time,” Sylvester said, startling Lottie. She’d almost forgotten he was there, he’d been so quiet. She turned to see Sylvester was glaring at her. “You don’t have to keep nagging me. I know what I have to do. And I’ll do it.”

“I wasn’t nagging,” Lottie shot back. “I was just *saying*—”

“Well, don’t, okay?” he interrupted. “Just don’t.”

“I really thought you two would get along better,” Death said, almost absently.

* * *

Death brought them to a little clearing in the woods. The tree they’d come through closed up behind them. The afternoon sun fell through the trees in sheets of gold, pooling around the ferns and flowers. Birds sang and the breeze rustled the leaves, making the trees

sigh and hiss. It seemed like every other day. Lottie sat down and stroked the grass, letting the cool blades slide through her fingers.

“Lottie,” Sylvester said, “I need your he—Would you come here?”

Lottie looked up to see Sylvester sitting a little ways away at the foot of a tree. Death was standing to one side, leaning on his scythe.

“Why don’t you come over here?” she asked. “Why do I have to come there? And what do you need me for?”

Sylvester opened his mouth and Lottie could tell by the way the corners of his lips pulled down that he was about to yell at her. Then he closed his mouth again and scratched his black hair. He stood up and walked toward her.

“I need you to help focus my Finding,” he said, sitting in front of her. “If the bow is yours, then it’ll be easier to Find if you’re...helping.”

“Why didn’t you ask before?”

Sylvester glared. “I shouldn’t have needed you. If they hadn’t set a trap, it would have worked without you.”

“Can we please get on with it?” Death asked.

“Sorry,” Lottie and Sylvester said together.

They stared at each other a moment, glared a little. Then Sylvester said, “Okay, close your eyes. And try to think about the bow.”

“I’ve never seen it before—how can I think about it?”

“Think of your mother,” Death said. “Think of a link that connects her to you. The bow’s a part of that link.”

Lottie closed her eyes and thought of her mother. She didn't remember much. She knew from pictures that her mother had lots of long, curly red hair, like Lottie did. Lottie remembered that she sang while she cooked or gardened, but Lottie couldn't remember any of the words. The melody came back to her though, and she could just barely hear her mother's voice as a hum of song. Lottie imagined that hum was a golden thread. She imagined that she held one end of the thread and her mother held the other. She was the mother from a photograph, so she didn't move or look at Lottie, but she held the end of the thread in a tight, frozen grip. The thread hummed and shone and Lottie wondered if this was enough.

Lottie felt a tug on her end of the golden thread and realized, as though she was observing someone else, that she was angry. She heard the hum of song and saw the photograph mother, but it wasn't enough. Why hadn't her mother left her a message? Of course, she couldn't have known that the Nimetu would attack all at once so many years before it happened, but she had known that Lottie was a Sentinel, she had known how important that was, she had known that no one else could have explained it. So why hadn't she left something for Lottie to find? Why not leave instructions in her will to give Lottie a letter on an appointed day? Why hadn't she told Lottie's father what she was so he wouldn't spend so many years trying to convince Lottie that the things she saw and felt weren't real—so that he could help? Why was Lottie's only connection to this woman in the photograph some magical bow that Lottie had never heard of and had no idea how to use? The golden thread began to shudder.

“Got it,” she heard Sylvester say.

His voice jarred the image of the photograph mother and the golden song out of Lottie's head and she opened her eyes to glare, though at him or at her mother, Lottie wasn't really sure. But Sylvester was grinning, and then she realized what he'd just said.

"It's in your backyard," Sylvester said. "It's hidden in the trunk of a tree."

* * *

It wasn't long before they were through the nowhere space Death traveled and walking out Lottie's back door. The porch was the same worn wood, but now yellow police tape circled the railings, blocking the steps down to the yard. Lottie's bike and other toys were gone from the yard where she'd left them, and she wondered where they'd been taken. The fence still stood tall around the yard, disappearing around the side of the house. The two little trees—slender maples—stood at one end of the lawn. The big oak tree stood at the other, with the swing hanging down from one strong branch.

Death had said that even though they had moved to this house only recently, that the bow must have followed them, moving from one tree to another to be close to Lottie. Lottie wished it had just hurried up and followed her to Kin House. She didn't want to be in this yard, standing on this porch.

Lottie heard the sound of the door shutting behind them again, but refused to look around. If she did, she was afraid the urge to go inside and up to her room to hide under her covers would be too much and that she would cry. Even without looking, she wanted nothing more than for the last two days to have been a dream. She listened for the sounds of Joyce and her father moving around inside the house behind her. The thought made her eyes sting, so she ducked under the yellow police tape and walked down the porch steps.

"Which is it?" she asked, quiet.

“The oak,” Sylvester said, also quiet.

“We must hurry,” Death said. “They may already be here.”

They sprinted across the yard to the oak. Lottie ran her fingers down the rough bark. She didn't see a secret door or a big knothole she'd never noticed before.

“Just reach inside,” Death said.

Lottie gave him a look. She had been playing around this oak tree for months now and never once had she been able to reach inside it.

“Trees have different rules,” Death said. “They function as gateways, but they also know things. It will know what you want. Your mother's bow will have told it about you. Just reach inside.”

Then Lottie felt the presence of Nimetu and a moment later noise from the house made them all turn. The back door opened again, but the other side wasn't stardust and nothingness. It was her mudroom and it was filled with monsters. Three Nimetu came out onto the porch, making smooth, scurrying spider movements.

Sylvester took a step back, running into the swing and jumping with fright. Death took several strides forward, towards the monsters. Lottie turned back to the tree. She pressed her hand against the trunk. It was still as firm and rough as always.

“It's Lottie,” she said. “I'm the Sentinel. Please, I need my bow.”

She nearly jerked her hand back as the bark beneath her hand softened and gave. Quick, Lottie plunged her fingers into the trunk. It felt like pushing her hand through fine sand. First her fingers disappeared, then her hand, then her arm up to the elbow. She reached, fingers splayed, searching. Then she closed her hand on something solid and pulled.

There she stood with a bow and a quiver in her hand. Without thinking, she threw the strap of the quiver over her shoulder and turned back toward the monsters, settling the bow into her left palm where it fit perfectly. It was warm. Without thinking she drew an arrow from the quiver with her right hand. Without thinking she nocked the arrow to the bow and pulled the string back to her jaw. She aimed at the Nimetu, who had just reached Death.

The Nimetu froze in their tracks. It wasn't the wary, resentful pause that the Nimetu in the vault had done. This was a hard, fast, frightened stillness, like rabbits or deer. Death turned his head, saw her, and smiled.

"Others are coming," hissed one of the Nimetu. "You can't defeat us all."

"I think I can," Lottie replied and was surprised to find that she meant it.

One of the other monsters darted forward. Lottie turned, aimed, and loosed the arrow in one easy movement. It felt like she had always held a bow. The arrow landed in the Nimetu's shoulder and it fell to the ground, wailing. Lottie already had another arrow nocked. She took a step away from the tree, closer to the monsters.

Death ran towards her and so did the Nimetu. Lottie loosed her arrow and hit a second monster in the leg, above its highest knee joint. It too, fell to the ground. Death made it past her and to the oak and Lottie heard the sound of a doorway appearing. She didn't look behind herself. She watched the last Nimetu. It watched her. It glanced at its fellows, holding their injuries and snarling, whining.

Lottie aimed a third arrow at it. It hissed.

"Lottie," Death said behind her.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and she let herself be guided backwards, through the door. Just as she felt one foot land in the between place, the back door of her house spewed dozens of Nimetu, their long legs carrying them smoothly and quickly across the lawn. The last uninjured monster made a lunge for the door in the oak, but it was too late. Lottie took another step and the door closed and disappeared.

Chapter 11 In Which Lottie Learns Something

They returned to Kin House. Lottie and Sylvester changed clothes, which Cass insisted on Mending, and they told the story of retrieving the bow while Gertie put band-aids on all their cuts and scrapes. Lottie was relieved when she finally got to go upstairs to her room to examine the bow and arrows more closely. Inside her room, she sat cross legged on her bed and laid the bow across her lap. She laid the quiver full of arrows down in front of her.

She ran her hands along the bow. When she'd been told that she was to have a magical bow, she'd expected it to be ornately carved or painted or to sparkle, but this bow was carved out of wood the color of honey and arched smoothly and simply from one end to the other. The grip was wrapped in dark brown leather. The only decoration was the way the grain of the wood flowed over its surface. Lottie liked it this way. It was so lovely it almost seemed to glow.

She remembered using the bow back in her yard, and her stomach pulled unhappily. It was beautiful and she was glad to finally have it, but now.... Now Lottie knew that because she could fight that she would have to fight. She turned her attention to the quiver, hoping to find a pocket on the outside that held a letter or even a short note, but there was no pocket.

The quiver was made of stiff, brown leather, about the same color as the grip on the bow. Lottie removed an arrow. The shaft was made of a darker wood than the bow, the feathers on the end were pale, almost white, and the heads were made of cloudy metal, sharp to the touch. She put the arrow back in the quiver and then furrowed her brow. Something was odd. She took an arrow out and counted the number in the quiver.

“Five,” she murmured.

She put the arrow she was holding back in the quiver and counted them again while her hand still touched that arrow.

“Six.”

She took her hand away and counted.

“Five.”

She hadn't noticed an arrow disappear, even though she'd been staring hard at the quiver. She tried something new, took all five arrows out at once and stared at the quiver, now empty. It remained empty. She looked away for a moment to put the arrows down on the bed on her other side. When she looked back there were five more arrows in the quiver. Lottie removed them, set them with the rest, turned back, and the quiver had five arrows. She did it again. Now there were fifteen arrows laying on the bed and five in the quiver. She picked up the quiver and replaced the arrows one by one. Once she'd put all fifteen arrows back into the quiver, she counted. Five arrows. She never actually saw them appear or disappear. They simply were either there or they weren't. Despite herself, Lottie grinned.

“Cool.”

Lottie looked up. Sylvester was standing in her doorway. She hadn't heard him approach and she wondered how long he'd been standing there.

“Did you know it could do that?” he asked.

Lottie shook her head. “I didn't know anything about any of this until yesterday.”

Sylvester nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something. That morning, Lottie would have snapped at him to just say whatever he wanted to say and go away. Now she just waited.

“That was pretty cool earlier,” he said, “when you shot those monsters. You were pretty good.”

“I was aiming for their hearts,” Lottie admitted.

Sylvester looked at her then, and smiled. “Well, you’re pretty new at this.”

“Yeah.”

“I was thinking,” Sylvester said and paused to swallow once, “that maybe I could show you how to do a trance...since you didn’t see it earlier. Then you could begin to really use your Sentinel abilities.”

Lottie smiled carefully. “That would be great,” she said and scooted closer to the head of the bed so there was room for Sylvester to sit at the foot.

Sylvester smiled too and looked relieved, like he’d been afraid she would throw something at him. He sat on the bed cross legged, like her, facing her, just like they had in the woods, but this time neither of them glared.

“This doesn’t mean we’re friends though,” Sylvester said. “Got it?”

Lottie felt her eyebrows jump in surprise, but she refused to be sad or hurt. He might be the best Finder in the world, but he was also just some dumb boy, Lottie thought. She made herself grin, knowing it would bug him.

“Why would I want to be friends with such a jerk?” she asked.

Sylvester narrowed his eyes at her but nodded. “Fine. Just so we’re clear.”

“We’re clear.”

“Fine,” he said.

“Fine,” Lottie agreed.

They sat in silence for a moment. Eventually, Sylvester took a deep breath and let it out.

“Okay, it’s actually not that hard once you know what you’re doing,” he said. He rolled his shoulders a couple of times and placed his hands on his knees, palms down.

Lottie placed her hands on her knees too, with her bow still lying across her lap. She felt better with it there.

“Okay,” Sylvester said, “so you’re trying to just think of one thing and nothing else. Like, when I want to Find something, I just think about that one thing that I want to Find. But when I started out, my grandpa taught me to do the Simple Trance. He said once you can do the Simple Trance, then everything else is easy.”

“Your grandpa’s the one who trained you how to be a Finder?” Lottie asked.

Sylvester nodded. “Yep. He was a Finder too. Most of the boys in my family are Menders, like my dad. My dad and all my uncles—all my cousins—they’re all Menders, right on down the line forever. Grandpa and me, we’re the only Finders. And that’s better than being a dumb Mender any day.”

Lottie shrugged. He’d said that like he was daring her to disagree with him, but she didn’t know enough about this stuff to know whether he was right or not. Both abilities sounded good to her, but she supposed it was never fun being the odd one out. Still, Sylvester’s family drama was not what she was here to learn about.

“So what’s the Simple Trance he taught you?” she asked.

“It’s where you try to think of just one thing,” Sylvester held up a finger, clearly enjoying being the teacher. “It’s something that’s important to what you are but isn’t about

actually doing anything. So instead of focusing on a particular thing I want to Find, when I do the Simple Trance, I look at this.”

He took something out of his pocket and showed it to her. It was a tiny carving of a cat, curled up like it was sleeping. It was only about the size of a quarter, made out of black stone of some kind. Lottie didn't try to touch it—it felt too personal.

“It's the first thing I ever Found, my grandpa said,” Sylvester told her, gazing fondly at the cat. “We used to go on walks together in the woods and around town and everywhere. My grandpa told me I Found this when I was just two and he kept it for me until it was time for me to start training, because he knew I'd need a focus item. This cat always reminds me of my grandpa and of being a Finder.”

Lottie didn't have to think about what she would focus on. The bow. Her mother's bow.

Sylvester put his hands in his lap, facing up, the cat curled up between the lines of his palm. “So all you do for the Simple Trance is to look at your focus item. Try to memorize it. Think about how you feel about it. You can think about being a Finder—or a Sentinel—but you aren't allowed to worry about it. Stay calm. Watch the focus item.”

Lottie nodded, but felt nervous. She wasn't good at not thinking. When she couldn't sleep, Joyce always suggested she try to just think of nothing, to listen to the sounds of the night outside, so that her brain would turn off and she'd be able to sleep, but Lottie had never been good at it. Her brain didn't like to turn off. But she took her bow in both hands, with the string almost touching her belly. She looked down at the bow.

The grain of the wood flowed across the bow, darker and lighter lines in the honey-colored wood. It swirled and made faces and tapered off into nothingness. Lottie smiled

when she realized that the grain looked like the flow of a river, with riffles and pools and places where the water ran unchecked. She thought about what tiny wooden fish and insects would live in which parts of the wood grain. There would be wooden caddisfly larvae in those riffles along the arch of one arm so tiny she'd need a microscope to tell what they were. There would be even tinier waterboatmen dancing across the surface of those pools by the grip. Honey colored sunfish would swim forever down the lower half of the bow, where the grain was gentle and straight.

Lottie felt peaceful here. She was alone but she felt like her father was with her—and her mother. Joyce too, because today it felt wrong to leave her out—like Lottie would be leaving her alone with the Nimetu. They all sat together watching the wooden river flow past them, and Lottie decided that at least for now, she wouldn't be upset at any of them for things they had or hadn't done. For now, she decided, they could all just sit together.

Then Lottie began to feel other presences nearby. It took her a moment to realize that these presences were monsters, because they didn't frighten her. She couldn't see them because she was too focused on the bow and the river and her family, but she could feel them. She felt them shift and their movement sent vibrations through the air that buzzed against her skin in different places and at different speeds so she could tell how far away they were and how fast they were moving. Most were miles and miles away, but she could feel them moving.

She realized she could smell some of them—the ones that were closest. They smelled cold and dusty, and she knew those were not Nimetu. They were in some other world. She focused on the bow, and scents from farther off came to her. These were dank smells, sweet with decay and rich with mud—not the real mud of real rivers, but a ghostly,

shiny mud from the other side of the mirrors. Lottie knew that was what Nimetu smelled like. Smelling it now reminded her of smelling it in the vault and catching whiffs of it in her backyard, but now she could identify the fake-ness: it was the smell of the reflection of something real.

Lottie wondered, as if from very far away, why she wasn't frightened to know there were Nimetu close enough that she could feel them moving and smell them stinking. But she wasn't afraid. There was no fear sitting beside the honey colored river.

"Lottie," she heard. She couldn't tell who had said it. "Lottie."

With great effort, Lottie looked up and away from the bow. Sylvester was sitting in front of her on the bed, but he wasn't looking at her. She realized she hadn't heard his voice. She looked behind her, to where he was staring, toward the doorway.

Death and a teenage girl she didn't recognize stood there. The girl was dressed all in black like Death, but she also wore a great deal of silver jewelry and black eye makeup. Her hair, too, was black, and straight as grass.

"Lottie," Death said again and Lottie noticed that his features were tight with worry. "This is Philomena. She is a Seer."

"The Nimetu have figured out you're here," the girl said. "They'll be here in less than an hour. We need to leave. Now."

Chapter 12
In Which there is a Long, Dark Drive

Lottie didn't need to pack—she had nothing but her bow and quiver anyway. She jumped off the bed and followed Death and Philomena into the hallway. She heard Sylvester scrambling behind her. Philomena, the teenage girl all in black, turned and started down the hallway before Lottie even reached the door, and made her way down the steps. She didn't look behind her to make sure they were still following. Death waited for Lottie.

“Where will we go?” Lottie asked as they followed the Seer.

“I assume Philomena has a plan,” he said. “Seers tend to plan.”

“But we have to go rescue my dad and Joyce,” Lottie said.

“Yes,” Death replied. “But not tonight. Tonight we simply have to leave here. You must get some rest.”

“I'm coming, too,” Sylvester said.

By then they'd reached the ground floor and were hurrying to follow Philomena out the front door. Lottie looked at Death to see what he thought. She wasn't sure how useful Sylvester would be. He'd frozen with fear in the vault. He'd cowered behind her in her backyard.

But Death nodded. “Yes, you are. We will need you to help find Lottie's parents—and perhaps other things in the Mirror World as well.”

They stepped out into the night, for it was night now. Crickets and frogs sang in the forest around them instead of birds. The air was cool, wet, and still. Philomena was standing next to a motorcycle with a big sidecar attached to the right side. It was filthy. Dried mud caked every inch of it, even the spokes on the wheels. She also saw that the

mirrors on the handlebars had been taken off. Cass crouched beside it, tinkering with what Lottie supposed must be the engine.

“Aren’t we just going to go through that between place again?” Sylvester asked.

“The one between doors?”

Philomena’s head jerked around. “No,” she said. “You have been there too much already. It isn’t safe to spend so much time in that place—not for humans.”

“The bike will be fine,” Death said.

“So glad you agree,” Philomena replied, turning back around to dig into the sidecar. She turned back to them holding a pair of dirty white helmets. “Put these on.” She shoved them toward Lottie and Sylvester.

“Wait!” came Gertie’s voice from the front door.

She rushed to them, holding a grocery bag. Behind her, Dale was carrying a small duffle bag.

“You need a change of clothes—and a jacket,” Gertie said to Lottie, handing her the bag. “These appeared in the closet today. They should be your size. There’s also a toothbrush and toothpaste in there. And some snacks.”

“Thank you,” Lottie said, and hugged her.

She hugged Dale too. Cass hugged Sylvester fiercely, and Lottie could have sworn she saw a tear trickle down Cass’s face. Then he straightened up and turned to Death.

“I’ve fixed the bike up some—should get you where you’re going without any trouble,” he said. Then he focused on Death, didn’t even try to smile. “You keep these children safe, you understand?”

Sylvester looked up at his father. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to stay here,” Dale said when Cass didn’t respond. “We’ll have a few surprises ready for the Nimetu when they show up.”

“But, Dad!” Sylvester said, eyes going wide.

“Don’t argue, son,” Cass said. “They’ll need a Mender, but you don’t. Go with Death. You’ll be able to Find me again when it’s safe.”

“But—” Sylvester began.

“We need to go,” Philomena interrupted. “Now. Not in five minutes. Right now.”

Lottie wanted to yell at her for being mean, but she didn’t, because she knew Philomena was also right. She climbed into the sidecar and pulled the dirty helmet down over her head. She shoved the bag from Gertie down by her feet and cradled the bow and quiver to her chest. Cass ushered Sylvester in beside her. Sylvester complained at having to share with Lottie. Lottie just rolled her eyes.

Philomena sat on the bike and turned the key. It roared to life. Death sat behind Philomena on the seat, his scythe strung across his back on a strap that hadn’t been there a moment ago. Lottie and Sylvester waved good-bye until they rounded the first bend, and then Gertie, Dale, and Cass all disappeared.

“Why is the motorcycle so filthy?” Sylvester asked, shouting petulantly over the noise of the bike.

“So it doesn’t reflect anything,” Philomena shouted back. “Duh.”

Lottie looked and saw that while Philomena’s helmet had once been a shiny black, it was now so scratched up and dusty that it looked about a hundred years old. None of their helmets had visors, and she squinted in the wind that their speed made. Death wore no helmet and didn’t squint.

“You *do* have your driver’s license, right?” Sylvester asked. His tone was annoyed, but Lottie could tell from his tense muscles that he was also scared, and trying to hide it.

“I have my permit,” Philomena replied. She didn’t turn her head to look at him. “Now pipe down. I have to concentrate.”

Lottie wasn’t sure how comforting she found that, but her options were limited so she kept quiet. They drove through trees for a long time, dirt road eventually becoming paved. The roar of the motorcycle drowned out the crickets and the frogs, but the night air still felt cool and soft, even as it blew over Lottie’s face. She wondered where they would stay the night. Then the trees gave way to farmland, and they drove past field after field of tall cornstalks. The wind wasn’t so soft when they weren’t under the trees and Lottie squinted harder.

“Where are we going?” she called.

“To a farm,” Philomena called back. “The wife owes me a favor. They’re going to give us dinner and let us sleep in their barn.”

“Why can’t we sleep in their *house*?” Sylvester asked.

“Too many mirrors,” Lottie said, before Philomena could reply.

Lottie watched the sky. The stars were out and she looked for familiar constellations. There was Orion with his belt. There was the Big Dipper. There were the Seven Sisters, tiny, dim, and clustered close together. The moon was bright and had a circle around it, like it did sometimes. Lottie had asked her father once why that happened. She couldn’t remember his answer and she felt a lump rise in her throat. She rubbed the face of the watch on her wrist and stopped looking at the sky.

After what felt like a very long time, Philomena turned off the paved road onto another dirt one. Then she turned into a driveway. Lottie could see the farmhouse with bright windows against the deep blue of the sky. Across the yard stood a big barn. Philomena parked in front of the barn doors and turned off the bike.

As they got out, the door of the farmhouse opened and a woman came outside. Philomena went to greet her. They spoke quietly for a moment. Lottie couldn't hear what they said. Then the woman handed Philomena a couple of big plates piled with something and went back inside. Philomena returned to them.

“Get the door, will you?” she said.

Death opened the big barn door and they all filed in. The barn was dark and smelled of hay, animal, and dung. Lottie had been on a field trip to a farm with her fourth grade class and it had smelled just the same. Then Death's scythe began to glow and she could see. Most of the barn was filled with huge bales of hay. They looked like giant, irregular fuzzy steps going up all the way to the ceiling. One of the empty corners was full of shovels and pitchforks and other farm tools that Lottie didn't know the names for. The last corner was clearly made up as a sort of guest room. The floor was strewn with hay and, upon closer inspection, saw dust, and was covered with several blankets. More blankets sat neatly folded on a crate.

Then the barn was filled with bright, white light. Lottie gasped and whipped around to look at the door. Sylvester stood there, squinting and smiling sheepishly.

“Found the light switch,” he said.

They all sat down on the makeshift beds, which crackled and rustled as they settled themselves. It turned out that one of the big wooden platters the woman had given

Philomena was full of fried chicken and the other with biscuits. Lottie realized how hungry she was only after she took her first bite of chicken. Before she knew it, she'd eaten two drumsticks and was working on her third biscuit.

Philomena wiped her hands on the corner of one of the blankets and took a little pouch out of her purse. From that bag, she took something round and bright. It was a little ball that fit into Philomena's palm that looked like it was made of glass.

"What's that? Some kind of crystal ball?" Sylvester asked. "I thought those were only used in dumb movies."

"It's my travel ball," the Seer replied, ignoring his jab. "The one I usually use was too big and heavy to bring."

"Can't the Nimetu see through that too?" Lottie asked, shifting in her seat. "You can see reflections in it."

Philomena shook her head. "They can't use things like this. This is mine. It's *my* magic. It's like Death's scythe or the metal heads on your arrows, Lottie. Some things cannot be used by monsters. Some things are sacred."

"What are you looking for?" Death asked.

Philomena sighed impatiently. "I'm making sure the future is changed," she said, peering into the little ball. "I'm making sure they haven't found you."

They waited. Lottie finished her biscuit and began picking at the crispy skin of one of the last chicken wings, more for something to do than because she was hungry. She pondered another question, turning it over in her mind, but didn't want to interrupt the Seer at her task. But it wasn't long before Philomena sighed again, this time with relief, and

looked up at them. She smiled slightly, and Lottie realized this was the first time she'd ever seen the older girl smile.

"It's changed," she said. "We're safe."

"Good," Death said, smiling too.

"What about my dad?" Sylvester asked.

"And Gertie and Dale," Lottie added.

"They're alive," Philomena said. "I can't see them clearly. Things must still be happening. But I didn't get an impending doom feeling from them anyway, which is usually a good sign."

"Why am I not comforted?" Sylvester asked.

Philomena shot him a glare. "I'm doing what I can. I saved you guys, didn't I?"

"You did," Death said, before Sylvester could respond. "And we are all grateful for your intervention, Philomena. But there is nothing more we can do tonight, and it is important that you all get a good night's sleep before tomorrow."

"Actually I have a question first," Lottie said. "If you can see into the future, then why didn't you know all this was going to happen? Why didn't you know the Nimetu were going to attack? Or that they'd found a way to steal the names of the dead and cross over in the first place?"

Philomena shook her head, sharply, impatiently. "It doesn't work like that. Before he left for work in the morning, did you dad check the weather forecast for rain of toads? No. Because why would there be a rain of toads? My Sight works the same way. I have to look for something to find it. I didn't think to look for a monster invasion. I didn't know it

had happened until it had happened and others told me. I only knew you were in danger because I was looking for any remaining Sentinels.”

Lottie nodded but didn't flinch. “Okay. Thank you.” She filed that bit of information away in her brain for later.

Philomena's eyebrows went up a little in surprise. “You're welcome.”

“You should all sleep,” Death said again. “It was a long day for you and tomorrow will be equally long. I will stand watch.”

“But what are we doing tomorrow?” Sylvester asked.

“We're going to the Mirror World,” Lottie said, surprising herself a little. She glanced at Death, assuming he would disagree. She might have her bow, but she was still untrained. Still, if they were going to have a chance of saving her father and Joyce, they had to go as soon as possible. Lottie stroked the face of the watch at her wrist.

But Death only nodded. “We have retrieved your bow and arrows,” he said, “and we do not know what the Nimetu will do if we give them time to think, so we must act first.”

Lottie nodded. She wanted to ask Death if he thought she was ready—really ready—to face the Nimetu, but she was afraid of his answer. It didn't matter anyway. Whether she was ready or not, it was time. It was past time. Lottie thought of her mother, wondered when *she* had begun hunting monsters. As young as Lottie? Had she been as frightened as Lottie was now?

“Get some sleep,” Death said.

They nodded. Philomena stacked the plates and put them near the door. Sylvester turned out the lights, and once more Death's scythe was the only illumination while they

settled onto their makeshift mattresses. Lottie curled up under a blanket, using a second one as a pillow. Sylvester did the same near her, while Philomena took the place nearest to the doors. The glow from Death's scythe dimmed until Lottie could only make out the outline of Sylvester.

"Are we really going to the Mirror World tomorrow?" he asked, almost whispering.

Lottie looked at him. He didn't look frightened exactly.

"Yes," she said.

"I'll Find them, Lottie," he said. "Your parents. I won't be tricked again."

Lottie nodded and smiled. "I know. You're the best Finder in the world."

Sylvester smiled too. "Yeah, well. I'm no Sentinel."

Lottie stopped smiling. "Yeah. Lucky for you."

He snorted. "Don't be a wuss. Being a Sentinel is pretty cool, even if it is scary. Not as cool as being a Finder, of course, but not everyone can be a Finder."

"I guess. I've always been scared of monsters. I wish I could just go back to telling myself they weren't real."

"I saw those Nimetu at your house though. At the tree. They're scared of you too. That's gotta be pretty cool. You're what monsters are afraid of."

Lottie smiled. "That *was* pretty cool."

Chapter 13
In Which They Cross the Bridge

The lady from the farmhouse brought out eggs, sausage, and toast the next morning. She looked like she wanted to ask questions, but Philomena ushered her back out of the barn before she could start.

“Thank you, Mrs. Smith,” Philomena said, almost shoving the woman out the doors.

“Well, you let me know,” the woman said, looking over her shoulder, “if you need anything el—”

“We *will*, Mrs. Smith,” Philomena said and gently shut the door on the end of the woman’s sentence.

“Why’d you chase her out so fast?” Sylvester asked, mouth full of sausage. “She wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“There are mirrors in that house,” Philomena said. “The less she knows about who spent the night in her barn, the better.”

Lottie nodded and started in on her own breakfast. She was wearing the new clothes that Gertie had given her: jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and a royal blue hoodie. They fit perfectly and Lottie tried not to miss Kin House and the gentle couple who lived there while she ate her scrambled eggs. They weren’t as good as Dale’s.

“What did you do for her?” Lottie asked, to distract herself. “To make it so she owes you a favor, I mean.”

“That’s private,” Philomena said. Then she flinched a little, probably hearing the tone of her own voice. “It’s not my place to say.”

“It’s okay,” Lottie said.

She couldn't quite figure this older girl out. Was she always this grouchy? Lottie wasn't sure. She seemed to feel a bit bad when she snapped, but she was a teenager. Lottie's dad said teenagers were always grouchy. It was "their natural state of being." But if Philomena was just like every other sullen teenager, then why had she risked so much to help them? For the rest of the meal, Lottie was quiet. They all were.

Before they left, Sylvester made Philomena use her crystal ball to make sure his father and Gertie and Dale were all still alright. With a sigh, but not much protest, Philomena began her trance. When she came out, she said that they were all still okay. All the windows in the house had been smashed and they were running low on band aids for their cuts, but none of them had been badly hurt. The Nimetu had either gone back to the Mirror World to tend to their own wounds or gone back out into the world, depending on how badly they had been hurt by the traps the grown-ups had set around and in Kin House. Gertie and Dale were coaxing the house to replenish its stores while Cass Mended what could not be replaced. Sylvester seemed satisfied enough with this, though Lottie could see by the pull of his full lips that he wasn't happy.

They slipped away without saying good-bye to the woman in the house. The morning was cool and Lottie was grateful for the hoodie. She climbed into the mud-caked sidecar with Sylvester and held her bow close where it knocked gently against her helmet each time she breathed out. Philomena and Death got on the motorcycle and they all drove back up the driveway to the road.

"Are we going to the Mirror World now?" Sylvester asked.

"To the Bridge that leads to the Mirror World," Death said. "It is roughly thirty leagues away. Or a hundred miles. However that works out."

“Sure seems like it would be faster to take the between place,” Sylvester said, hinting.

“Too dangerous,” Philomena said.

“Why is it dangerous?” Lottie asked. She missed the between place. It was lovely and strange. And she really wasn’t looking forward to spending hours crammed into the sidecar with Sylvester.

“Mortals can’t spend too much time there, okay?” Philomena snapped. “It’s too big a place—spend enough time there, and it’ll suck you dry. You’ll look like you, but your memories and feelings and everything that makes you who you are will be gone. Useful things, like the fact that you’re the last free Sentinel. And there’s no knowing how long you have to be there for this to happen. It isn’t worth the risk. So quit asking.”

“Is that why we aren’t just taking the between place to the Mirror World?” Lottie asked.

“No,” Death said, before Philomena could respond. They went over a bump and he reached up to steady his scythe, which waved like a flag in the wind behind him. “The between place does not go to the Mirror World. Only mirrors and the Bridge go there.”

“And the Bridge just happens to be pretty close to us?” Sylvester asked.

“No, it moves,” said Death. “That is why we are hurrying. If it moves before we get there, we will be forced to take the between place to get to it or it will take too long, and that is piling danger on top of danger.”

“So the Bridge is dangerous too?” Lottie asked, her stomach sinking.

“Oh, yes,” Death said.

“As dangerous as the between place?” Sylvester asked.

“No,” Death replied. “Much more dangerous than that.”

Lottie opened her mouth to ask what was so much more dangerous than having her identity slowly sucked out of her by swirling stardust, but closed it again. She’d ask once they got there. The fields unfolded around them as they sped down the road, tall cornstalks beginning to turn yellow in the weak sunshine. She tightened her grip on her bow. She tried to adjust her legs, but between her legs, Sylvester’s legs, and their two bags, she couldn’t move much.

There was a soft clunk of Sylvester’s helmet hitting hers. Lottie looked and saw that he’d dozed off. She sighed and on the exhale her bow clicked against the other side of her helmet. She looked down at the lower half of the bow and traced the grain of the honey colored wood with her eyes.

Hardly meaning to, Lottie let the corn fields and the buzzing motorcycle and Sylvester’s soft, even breathing fall away as she focused on her bow. Over and over she traced the ripples and pools in the river of the wood grain, letting her eyes slip over them, letting her mind sink down into them. Then she was beside the wooden river again. Her parents weren’t there this time—or they were—but only just. They were like the trees around the river: there but at the edge of her awareness. The river was at the center, with the wooden sunfish swimming down the smooth lines of the wood grain and the tiny wooden riverboatmen skimming the surface of the delicate ripples.

She could feel the monsters too. Their vibrations trilled against her skin and then were gone again as the motorcycle, Lottie realized, took her farther away from them. She caught whiffs of others, when they got close enough. Sometimes there was the fake river

mud smell of a Nimetu. Lottie wasn't afraid of them. They didn't know she was there. She knew *they* were there.

She went back to staring into the river, just letting her mind drift through the wood grain. She wasn't sure how long it was before she felt something else. It wasn't exactly a monster, but it smelled of fake river mud and of something else that she couldn't place. Lottie reached with her senses. Whatever it was, it was big and it was shaky, like it was a bed sheet on a clothesline and a great wind had picked up. The vibrations it gave off clattered against Lottie's skin and brought waves of Nimetu stink.

This must be the Bridge, Lottie thought. She tried to identify the other scent, the one that wasn't Nimetu. Whatever it was, it was sharp and strong. Lottie could almost feel it in her lungs. It was like taking a deep breath on a very cold day. It made Lottie want to cough.

She opened her eyes, breaking the trance, and the scent disappeared. They were no longer surrounded by farmland. The hills around them were covered in green and brown grass, and dotted with little clumps of trees. Every once in a while, Lottie saw a house. Some were huge, like mansions. Others were tiny, their peeling paint shaded by trees that grew too close to their walls and loomed over their roofs. The tiny houses usually had a few old barns with falling-in roofs and a rusted truck or two in the yard. The mansions had lawns that were still emerald green despite the coming of autumn, and little trees that had been trimmed so carefully they looked fake.

“Are we almost there?” she called over the buzz of the motorcycle.

“Yes,” Death said. “Nearly there.” He paused for a moment. “Do not be fooled when you see it. It may not look dangerous, but it is. Very. Do not touch it until it is time.”

Lottie thought of the violent clattering of the Bridge's vibrations and the sharp feel of its scent in her lungs. She shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of it," she called.

A few minutes later, Death called to Philomena to take a side street. She turned. Then he directed her to a gravel driveway. The rest of the ride was bumpy and slow. Sylvester finally woke up and grumbled the whole way.

When they came to one of the huge mansions, Philomena stopped the motorcycle and killed the engine. The quiet that followed was strange to Lottie's ears after so much noise. She glanced up at the house with its huge, well cleaned windows.

"We must hurry," Death said.

"Where is it?" Sylvester asked, lifting the bag that his father had given him out of the sidecar, and then Lottie's bag from Gertie. Then his brow wrinkled. "Hey, Lottie. Was your bag always a backpack?"

Lottie looked. Sylvester was holding a dark grey backpack that she'd never seen before.

"That bag is from Kin House," Death said. "It will have changed to suit your new needs—something you can wear easily. The ability will fade in a few days of being away from Gertie and Dale, but until then, it may even replenish itself."

Lottie silently thanked Gertie and Dale while Sylvester dug the granola bars out of his bag and transferred them to the new backpack. He was smiling. Lottie tried to smile but found that she couldn't. There was something scratching at the back of her mind.

She turned her attention back to the Bridge and realized that she could feel it now, even without being in her trance. Lottie looked to her left where the owners of the house had made a Zen garden with a carefully raked sand pit, a number of gray stones, a fake

waterfall fountain, and a little, wooden bridge. The bridge's rails were painted a bright, cheerful red and the whole thing looked shiny, like it had recently been polished. It wasn't long—only stretching from one side of the pool beneath the waterfall to the other. Lottie could almost have jumped over the pool herself without even bothering with the bridge.

“That's the Bridge,” she said, pointing.

Sylvester and Philomena looked at the bridge, then at each other, and then back at Lottie.

“Seriously?” Sylvester asked, zipping the backpack and pulling the straps on over his shoulders.

“The Bridge between this world and the Mirror World is more like the spirit of a bridge,” Death said. “That spirit may possess any physical bridge it wants. That is how it hunts.”

“It *hunts*?” Sylvester asked. “Like, it's alive?”

Lottie could feel the Bridge against her mind. She thought that really, the clattering was more like the knocking of long, long fingers against her mind. Clawed fingers.

“It eats people, doesn't it?” she said. “It eats anything that tries to cross its bridge. That's why it moves—because eventually the people and animals of a place learn to avoid it.”

Death nodded. “Yes.”

“Then how can we cross it safely?”

She heard a rustling to her right and looked. A deer was walking toward them from across the manicured lawn. It looked at them curiously and then its brown eyes settled on Death. It pricked its ears.

“We need a sacrifice,” Death said. “We need something to cross over with us that the Bridge can eat. This doe has generously answered my call.”

Lottie felt her stomach lurch and her throat begin to burn. She opened her mouth, but couldn’t think of anything to say. She looked at the deer. It was looking at the Bridge.

“Wait, you lured it here?” Sylvester said, his eyes wide. “For...for bait?”

“I sent out a call for a needed sacrifice,” Death said evenly. “She chose to answer it.”

“So...she knows what’s going to happen to her?” Lottie asked. Now her eyes burned too.

“Would it have been better to trick her?” Philomena asked, for once without any edge to her voice.

“No,” Lottie replied. “But...” But it wasn’t fair, she wanted to say. This wasn’t the deer’s fight. It shouldn’t have to die. And it was cruel that it would see it coming. It was cruel that it had to be afraid as well as to die.

She took a shaky breath and tried to remember her parents. They were depending on her. The whole world was depending on her to stop the Nimetu from flooding back into the human world. What was a deer’s life compared to all that?

A tear escaped the corner of her eye. She swallowed.

It was still a life.

Did my mother ever make a choice like this one? she wondered.

Aloud, she whispered, “Will this at least mean the rest of us are out of danger from the Bridge?”

Death didn't respond until she turned from the doe to look at him directly. He looked down, fiddling with his scythe, and then back up into her eyes. "No," he said. "Even with her, there is a chance that one of you may be consumed by the Bridge. But without the doe, one of you *will* be consumed. We need her."

Lottie felt the reaching, clattering talons of the Bridge against her mind. It was getting stronger. Lottie realized that it knew they were there. She looked at the doe. It was trembling now and Lottie knew that hesitating any longer was only making it worse for the creature.

"Let's go," she said, and turned to face the Bridge.

"Everyone hold hands," Death said. "Hold tight. If you let go, the Bridge has a better chance of catching you."

Sylvester took Lottie's hand—the one that wasn't holding her bow. She looked and saw that he was shaking and his lower lip was trembling. His hand was clammy. She squeezed it and he looked at her.

"You don't have to come," she said.

He shook his head. "You need a good Finder. I'm coming."

Philomena took Sylvester's other hand and Lottie looked behind them to see Death bowing to the doe. The doe bowed back and then turned and walked shakily to stand between them and the Bridge. Death took Philomena's hand, so that he and Lottie were on the ends.

The doe looked over her shoulder at them and then approached the Bridge. Her front hoof clicked dully against the wood. She paused, shuddered, and took another step. Death moved forward and placed one hand on the doe's rump. The doe walked. The air

above the Bridge began to shimmer, like heat waves over pavement. When the doe reach the center of the Bridge, she began to disappear like she was passing through an invisible window. First her head, then her shoulders. Lottie watched as first she, then Death, then Philomena, and then Sylvester disappeared before her eyes. Then it was just her on the Bridge, holding Sylvester's disembodied hand. Then she, too, began to disappear. Lottie closed her eyes.

The sounds of the country disappeared and were replaced by the sound of howling wind. Lottie gasped and clutched Sylvester's hand tighter as the force of the gale nearly knocked her off her feet.

"Walk as quickly as you can!" Death yelled above the din.

Lottie squinted, trying to see her surroundings. A narrow, stone bridge without guard rails stretched into the darkness. Lottie could see a glimmer of light at the other side. Everything else was just darkness and howling wind. The wind came from all directions, leaving her no sure way to lean, no way to really brace herself against it. Every breath she took hurt with the sharp, cold scent of it and she could name the smell now: fear. It scratched up the insides of her lungs and left its stink behind. The Bridge was just wide enough for the four of them to walk abreast, but the wind was so strong that they didn't dare—the people on the ends would be in constant danger of falling off the edges with an especially big gust of wind, and pulling everyone else down into the darkness with them.

They walked in a diagonal line and Lottie clutched Sylvester's hand as hard as she could. He did the same. The little bones in her fingers ached, but she wouldn't loosen her grip. The drumming, raking feel of the Bridge against her mind was almost worse than the

winds because while the wind threatened her body, Lottie felt that the clawed fingers on her mind were what really threatened *her*.

Out ahead of them the deer walked by herself, her head low, like theirs, fighting the wind. Lottie watched the deer for a moment before she had to lower her eyes. The force of the wind against her eyes was just too much. She wished she could close them, but didn't dare. Then over the howling of the wind, Lottie heard a deep scream from ahead. She looked up just in time to watch the wind pin the doe down with gales so forceful she was afraid the Bridge would crumble beneath her. Death stopped in his tracks at the head of the line and the rest followed suit—desperate to stay out of range of those winds. The doe struggled and Lottie could see her mouth open, tongue extended, like a silent scream. Then she began to rise and spin, picked up by a whirlwind. She bellowed for real this time.

Lottie tried to wrench her hand out of Sylvester's. If she could just get an arrow nocked on her bow, perhaps she could shoot the doe and end her suffering. It had been cruel of them to ask her to die in the first place—it was unbearable to watch her suffer.

Sylvester wouldn't let go. Lottie shook her hand, swinging wildly and with all her strength. Sylvester looked back at her.

“What are you doing?” he called. The wind was so loud now that she could barely hear him.

“Let go!” she shouted back.

“Are you crazy?” he cried.

“Let go of me!”

She glared at Sylvester with as much intensity as she could manage, and to her surprise, he let go. Lottie fumbled for an arrow, her hand sore and tingly from being gripped

so hard. She felt fletching under her fingers and pulled. She nocked the arrow on the bow. Her arms swayed no matter how hard she tried to be still. Above them the doe screamed.

Lottie took aim as best she could but before she could loose the arrow, there was a ripping sound. The doe came apart in pieces. The pieces rained down on either side of the narrow Bridge and Lottie could see them disappearing bit by bit as they fell, as though hundreds of mouths were taking bite after bite.

Death turned around. “Run!” he mouthed. Lottie couldn’t hear him.

Sylvester reached for her hand again. The arrow got in the way and Lottie could only get a partial grip on his hand before they were running. Lottie ran. The wind tore at her. Her eyes streamed with tears—both for the doe and because of the pain of the wind in her eyes. She held onto Sylvester by her fingertips. Any moment she would lose her grip. She’d trip. She’d be carried off by a gust of wind. She’d be pinned down like the doe and Sylvester would be unable to pull her free. They would keep running without her and she’d stay in the dark on the Bridge, forever.

The wind barreled down on her and she felt her shoulder getting sore. It *was* trying to pin her. Lottie tried to run faster, to at least get a better grip on Sylvester’s hand, but the wind made her slower. She felt her fingers slide down Sylvester’s by another inch. She screamed for help but could not even hear herself.

Then her fingers slipped. Before she knew it, Sylvester and the rest were gone. She’d lost them. She was alone in the dark—except that she wasn’t.

Without Sylvester to hold onto, Lottie stumbled and fell to her knees. The wind barreled down on top of her. It felt like she was kneeling under a waterfall. It felt like a thousand fists landing on her shoulders and back. The glimmer of light ahead, which had

been getting larger and larger as they ran, was now impossible to see because the wind had driven her eyelids closed.

Lottie imagined that soon she would rise into the air, that soon she would be ripped apart too, by the spirit of the Bridge. She pulled her arms close to her face, trying to curl up so that she couldn't be pulled to pieces. She hit herself in the cheek with the tip of the arrow she held.

The sharp pain amidst all the dull pain woke her up.

This is another monster, she thought. The Bridge is a monster. I'm a Sentinel. And there might be only one of me, but there's only one of it too.

Lottie pushed her head up and managed to open her eyes just to slits. Before her, on the Bridge, she could make something out in the darkness, standing between her and the light. It was a darker patch of dark, formless but definitely there. It moved closer to her.

Keeping her arms close until the last moment, Lottie dragged the arrow to the bow. Then she raised her arms and aimed at the dark.

"Get out of my way," Lottie said, or thought she'd said—she couldn't hear herself over the gale.

The bit of darkness paused, just like the Nimetu had back in her yard. It wasn't used to its prey fighting back, Lottie realized, and it certainly wasn't used to having to face down a Sentinel. The wind hit harder, nearly knocking Lottie over backwards, but the bow gave her strength. She held her ground.

Finally, the wind abated to being only difficult to move through, but not impossible. The darkness between her and the end of the Bridge moved to the side, slipped over the edge. Before it could change its mind, Lottie stood and ran toward the light.

The brightness and stillness of coming out the other side was so sudden that she fell to the ground. Her heart made a desperate, panicked jerk inside her chest, thinking she had fallen off the Bridge. She screamed again, but this time she heard herself.

“Lottie!” Death was beside her, kneeling and feeling her face with his hand. “Are you all right?”

Lottie panted and looked up. The sky above them was a pearly gray. There was no wind. There was no sharp scent in her lungs. She felt more tears fall from her eyes. She’d survived.

She sat up. “Is everyone else all right?”

“They both made it through,” Death said.

Lottie looked. Sylvester and Philomena were also laying on the ground, their clothes disheveled and torn along some of the seams. But neither looked hurt. Lottie took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. Every bit of her ached. She felt as though she’d been beaten with rocks.

She opened her eyes. Death was still looking at her, his pale face tight with concern and...yes, anger.

Lottie didn’t want to talk. She looked around herself. Everything was gray with fog. She could hardly see a hundred yards away. The ground was covered in scraggly grass, grayish and wet. She saw small lakes all around herself though, each one still as glass. Fog curled out of the water in hazy spirals. The edges of the ponds were stiff and strange, and Lottie realized each pond had a frame, like a painting or...a mirror.

“So this is the Mirror World,” she said, to no one in particular.

Chapter 14
In Which Lottie Makes a Difficult Choice

“Well, that sucked,” Philomena said, getting shakily to her feet.

“That poor deer,” Sylvester said, still sitting in the grass.

Lottie pushed herself to her feet and held her bow ready. “Yeah,” she said. “I think maybe I’ll become a vegetarian when I get home.”

“Yeah,” Sylvester said, nodding. “Me too.”

“You let go,” Death said.

Lottie looked down at him and saw Death’s face had become truly angry now. He was glaring up at her, his young boy’s features rigid. His scythe lay on the ground next to him, just within reach of his fingertips.

Lottie didn’t try to deny it. “I was trying to shoot the deer,” she said. “To save it.”

Death’s scowl deepened. He stood, apparently in no pain at all from the Bridge, which only reminded Lottie even more that he was not the boy he appeared to be. His scythe towered over all of them.

“That was kind,” Death said, slowly, “but not smart. You could have died, Lottie. You cannot take these unnecessary risks. You have to take too many necessary ones. It is a wonder you even made it out.”

Lottie stiffened. “But I didn’t die. I got out. On my own. I aimed an arrow at that monster’s heart and told it to get out of my way.”

“And it just moved out of your way, did it?” Death asked.

“Actually, it did,” Lottie snapped.

They were all quiet for a moment. Lottie thought of several other things she wanted to tell Death—that he couldn’t one minute expect her to fight monsters under her own

power and the next expect her to just obey his orders, that they had bigger problems now than her small lapse in judgment, that he was the one who got the deer killed in the first place and she had only been trying to make it bearable for the creature. She wanted to say all this and more. But she didn't. Her instincts—perhaps her Sentinel instinct, perhaps something else—were telling her not to push it.

“Very well,” Death said, finally.

Lottie thought she could feel the tension go out of Sylvester and Philomena a couple feet away, like they had been holding their breaths. Lottie allowed herself a tiny smile of relief as well.

“There is much to do,” Death continued. “Where do you believe we should start?”

Lottie felt her eyebrows jump a little with surprise. He had been angry with her a moment ago—why was Death suddenly asking what she thought? Was it a test? If it was, Lottie was determined not to fail it.

“Sylvester,” Lottie said, looking out into the fog for a moment before going to kneel down next to Sylvester, “you need to Find my parents. And Philomena? Can you um....Can you Scry for something helpful or important or dangerous or something?”

Philomena nodded, her arms crossed over her chest. “Sort of. I can Look for what should be done next. It won't necessarily give us anything useful, but it's worth a shot.”

“Good.” Lottie nodded. She stood back up. “Death and I will stand watch while you guys handle that.”

“It would be easiest if I had a focusing object,” Sylvester said. “Something of your dad's or your stepmom's.”

“Right.” Lottie looked down at her hands, saw her father’s watch. “Here, you can use this,” she said, undoing the buckle.

Sylvester reached up and took it from her, carefully, then settled into a cross-legged position in the grass. Philomena sat across from him, her little crystal ball cradled in her hands. Lottie and Death stationed themselves on either side of the two entranced members of their party. Lottie stared out into the mist. The fog curled and shifted over the lakes. Every time a tendril of mist cast a new shadow, Lottie’s heart leapt. It was a world of shadows. There was no real color anywhere. The grass might have been green in better light. The water in the lakes might have been blue if they were hit by sunshine. But as it was, everything was some kind of gray. Lottie was glad she was dressed in deep blues, and that Death and Philomena wore black. Even Sylvester wore muted browns and greens. Had any of them been wearing bright colors, they would have stood out in this world like cardinals in winter. Lottie reached up with one hand to touch her red hair, then pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up.

Lottie hoped her parents were close by. She didn’t know how they’d find more food in this world if their stores of granola bars and roasted almonds ran out. Then a thought hit her. What if her parents *were* very far away? What if this world was just as big as her own? What if she was on the wrong side of the planet? There was no between place here and no motorcycle. It would take forever to get to them—and who knew if they could even make it so far in a world populated by monsters who would love nothing more than to make meals out of them?

“Well,” Philomena said behind her with a sigh. “I think I know something important. Or possibly dangerous.”

Lottie turned around. Philomena was slipping her little crystal ball back into its pouch at her waist.

“Is it about my parents?” Lottie asked.

Philomena shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. It’s something else.”

“Why not wait until Sylvester is back with us?” Death said. “We do not want to disturb him.”

Lottie and Philomena nodded, and Lottie spent what felt like years waiting for Sylvester to come out of his trance. When he finally did open his eyes, it was all she could do to keep quiet. He looked up at her and grinned

“I found them,” he said. “They’re actually not even that far away. There’s a camp of Nimetu a few miles that way.” He pointed off into the fog. “That’s where they are. They’re being guarded.”

“So they are alive?” Lottie asked, almost unable to speak the words she was so breathless with relief.

“They’re alive,” he said. “They’re still in those pools—those pocket worlds—but they’re okay.”

“Great, let’s go now!” Lottie said, grinning too.

“Actually, we can’t go now,” Philomena said.

Everyone turned to look at her. Even Death looked surprised.

“There’s someone we need to talk to first,” Philomena continued. She too pointed into the mist, in the opposite direction that Sylvester had pointed. “Someone who has information we need. Well, maybe *something*. I’m not entirely sure what or who it is. But we need to go there first.”

Lottie's heart sank, and then, almost immediately, she felt her temper flare. "What do you mean? We already know where my parents are. What other information could we need?"

Philomena glared at her. "If I knew that, then I'd have told you. All I know is that it's important and it isn't about your parents."

"Well, that's not good enough," Lottie yelled. "We're not going way out of our way for nothing."

"It cannot be nothing," Death interjected. "Philomena is a good Seer. Her abilities would not lead her so astray. Whatever it is, it must be important."

"We can do it after we rescue my parents," Lottie insisted.

"We can't," Philomena said. "We have to do this first."

"It may be about how to stop the Nimetu from invading the human world," Death said, gently.

"I don't care!" Lottie shouted.

The shout didn't even echo. It was swallowed up by the fog. But still everyone fell silent and glanced around themselves, peering out into the gloom. Nothing. They turned back to each other.

"Could we split up?" Sylvester asked, quietly. "Two of us go to get Lottie's parents and two to talk to... whatever it is?"

"That sounds good to me," Lottie said. "Let's do that."

"Two problems with that," Philomena hissed. She ticked the items off on her fingers. "One: there's only one Sentinel here—only one person who can actually kill a Nimetu. Whatever pair doesn't have you, Lottie, is basically doomed. And two: you aren't

listening to me. We need to do my thing *before* going to get your parents. Not while we're doing it. Not after. Before. This mission is bigger than just your parents."

The words came out before Lottie could stop them: "But what if they die before we get to them?"

Everyone was quiet again. Philomena stood, pushing herself up with her hands, and came to stand in front of Lottie. She placed her hands on Lottie's shoulders. Her dark eye make-up and straight black hair made her skin look paler, like it was part of the mist.

"You have two choices," she said, surprisingly gently. "You can go after your parents and possibly ruin everything for us all. Or you can go after the information I've found and possibly win it all."

"Possibly," Lottie repeated.

"There are no definitely's," Philomena replied with a smile. "Not even for Seers. But every fiber of my being is telling me that we have to go find this thing first. I'm not that old, but I've learned over the years to trust my fibers."

Lottie remembered the feeling of being sure of herself, of her abilities. In the bank vault, in her backyard, during her first trance. She had been so sure. Looking into Philomena's eyes, she knew that was how sure she was of this. Lottie felt her lower lip begin to tremble again and she swallowed down the lump in her throat.

"Okay," she whispered. "But let's go quick."

"Quick as bunnies," Philomena said, patting Lottie's shoulders.

"I don't suppose you know how far away this person-thing is?" Sylvester asked.

Philomena shook her head. "Close. But I don't know how close. I just know it's that way." She pointed into the mist again.

Lottie sniffed and rubbed her nose on her sleeve. “Then we’ll go that way.”

“Here,” Sylvester said softly, pressing her father’s watch into her hand.

Lottie wrapped it around her wrist again, securing it carefully. “Thanks,” she said.

“Philomena and Lottie,” Death said, speaking for the first time since the argument began, “I think you two should go first. Sylvester and I will walk behind. Everyone, keep a sharp eye for trouble.”

Lottie nodded, though she wondered if Death wanted her to go first so he could keep an eye on her to be sure she didn’t take any more unnecessary risks. It didn’t matter. She knew what she had to do. They set off into the mist.

Chapter 15
In Which They Learn Something About the Nimetu—Something Bad

Lottie watched the fog for signs of life. There were none. No Nimetu, but also no birds or other animals. When she looked into the water of a lake as they passed by, there were no fish or insects. There were also no landmarks. No buildings or mountains or rivers. Just lake after lake. Each one they passed had a frame so they looked like giant mirrors—some five feet across and others dozens. Some had plain frames, just ovals of dark or light wood and plastic. Others had ornate metal frames, or stone, or enamel. Some had handles and Lottie knew they were hand mirrors.

At the edge of one, Lottie stopped, because she was beginning to wonder if they really were water and not glass. This one had a wide, ridged wooden frame, like on a medicine cabinet. She carefully leaned over the surface and saw herself perfectly reflected. Carefully, she ran her hand through her curls, and dislodged a couple of strands. These, she dropped onto the reflection. Huge ripples distorted the surface, far larger than a couple of strands of hair should have caused. So now she knew that they were water and not glass, but that answer had just led to another question. Lottie sighed and they moved on.

Philomena insisted they were still on the right course, and Lottie hoped she was right because Lottie couldn't tell where they were or where they'd come from. She didn't like it. Nothing felt entirely real. Real places had ecosystems and food chains and variations in the landscape. The Mirror World had none of that. Walking between all those framed ponds made her feel like she was a bug walking down the side of a huge, grassy house. And everything smelled fake. Now that she was here, she could tell where the Nimetu got their scent. With all the lakes, it should have smelled like water and mud and things

growing. Instead, it smelled like an air-freshener or a scented candle that was trying to smell like water and mud and things growing. Almost right, but not quite.

They didn't speak as they walked. They were all too focused on watching for attacks. The damp grass muffled their footfalls so they made almost no noise as they passed through the mist. Without birds or insects to sing and buzz, the silence quickly became almost unbearable. But they didn't speak. They didn't want to attract any Nimetu. The mist swirled and closed behind them as they walked on.

Lottie checked her father's watch every few minutes, which just made everything seem to take longer. Five minutes felt like an hour. Thirty minutes felt like a day. When they'd been walking for nearly an hour, Lottie decided it was time to have a break. She lifted her chin and turned her head so she could speak to Death, but then movement in the mist caught her eye.

"There," she said, pointing.

Everyone looked. The shape was dark and moved smoothly back and forth, getting larger as it went. It looked like it was flying close to the ground rather than walking.

"Is that...?" Sylvester began.

"A Nimetu," Lottie said, nodding. She looked at Philomena. "Is that what we're supposed to talk to?"

Philomena squinted into the fog and shrugged. "Can't be sure until we ask."

"You want us to just ask it?" Sylvester squeaked.

"There is only one," Death said, twirling his scythe between his fingers so the blade on top blurred to look like a little umbrella. "If it means us harm, it should not be difficult to overpower it."

“What if there are more?” Sylvester asked.

“Of course there are more,” Lottie replied. “This is their world. But I don’t think there are any others close by. I can sort of feel them, I think, when they get close.”

“You think?” Philomena asked.

The dark shape was becoming more distinct. Lottie could make out long, many jointed legs and long, hanging dark hair. She drew an arrow from her quiver and set it on her bow, but didn’t draw the bow.

“It’s hard to be sure here,” she said. “I think it’s because there are so many—or maybe they blend into their surroundings better here.”

“But you think there’s just the one right now?” Philomena asked, whispering now.

Lottie nodded, but didn’t respond. From the corner of her eye, she saw Death pull Philomena back behind him and take her place next to Lottie. He held his scythe casually, the end sitting in the soft grass, but he was twisting it just enough that the blade glimmered in the dull light of the Mirror World.

The Nimetu paused for a moment, as though noticing the scythe, and then proceeded forward. Lottie could see it fairly clearly now. It was different from the others she’d seen. Its legs had at least five joints a piece and...she counted slowly...there were six of them. Its arms were so long that it could trail its fingers in the grass several paces in front of it as it walked. Lottie couldn’t even count the joints in its fingers, but she was certain that it could wrap one hand all the way around her chest without any difficulty. Each limb ended in black skin, dark as the long hair that fell wetly from its head. The face, when it came closer, was thinner than the other’s she’d seen, and the mouth stretched from

one ear to the other, like a jack-o-lantern. The pale skin of its face and limbs almost seemed to melt into the fog.

It stopped a ways off. Lottie was fairly sure it was within range of her bow but knew it could move faster than it had just been doing if it wanted to. Much faster. She gripped her bow tighter and wondered what to say.

“So it is you,” the Nimetu said. Its voice was husky and grating, as though it was not often used. It grinned, and the breadth of its smile forced its whole face to widen slightly. “The last free Sentinel. Here. I wondered if you would come, I did.”

Lottie’s heart lurched but she refused to look frightened. “Yes, it’s me.”

“And you are here for the live things, are you, are you?” it asked, grinning wider. “For your parents and for others of your kind?”

“And to stop you Nimetu from stealing the names of the dead,” Lottie snapped. “What name have you stolen?”

The monster stopped grinning and pressed its thin lips together in anger. “I would not allow one of your odious names inside me,” it hissed back. “The young ones might think it gives them power, but we elders know the truth: names make us more human. I would not—would *not*—be a human for all the meat in your world.”

Lottie felt her eyes widen in surprise. So it wasn’t a coordinated attack, she thought. It was the younger generation rebelling against their elders. She felt a tiny flicker of hope stir inside her. And that explained why this Nimetu was different from the others—it was much, much older. Lottie wondered how long the Nimetu lived.

“Do you know how the young ones steal the names?” Death asked.

The elder Nimetu ran its long black fingers through the gray grass at its feet, clearly debating with itself. “They catch a human soul,” it said, finally, “when one happens to drift through a mirror into our world. They crack it open like an egg, yes, and drink the name out.”

“Then are the shells still here?” Death asked. “The rest of the broken souls?”

“Yes,” the Nimetu said, but it was glaring now. “Yes, the young ones keep the shells. The shells must remain for the odious name to survive. They destroyed the shells at first, but that killed the names. Now they keep the shells. They guard them—hold them tight.”

“Where?” Lottie asked.

The Nimetu turned to her and grinned again. Lottie couldn’t tell if that was a good sign or not. The smell of fake water and mud got stronger, as though the emotions of the elder Nimetu were wafting out scent.

“Same place as they are keeping your parents, little Sentinel,” it said. “Same place they keep everything. It is wrong—a human thing. The Nimteu are wanderers. To make a place their own is....” It shook its thin head in disgust. “This is what comes of having names—of becoming human. Wretched. They have even named the place they keep. They call it *Home*.” The elder Nimetu spat the word out like Lottie would a live beetle.

“So maybe we *can* do both,” Sylvester whispered, echoing Lottie’s own thoughts. “If they’re both in the same place.”

The Nimetu grinned the widest grin yet. “Oh, I doubt it. I do indeed doubt it. If you try to get the live things back, the young ones will circle the shells so you cannot get to

them. If you go for the shells, they will kill the live things to stop you. You would have to choose.”

The fake smells became stronger yet, as though with every new tooth Lottie could see in the creature’s smile, the more of its noxious breath escaped. She gathered her courage and decided to risk angering it again. She fingered the fletching on the arrow she held, reassuring herself that it was still there and ready.

“Not if you help us,” she said to the Nimetu. “If you help us, then we can be sure to stop your young ones from becoming any more human—we’ll take the names back and destroy their Home. They’ll be just like you again. If you help us.”

She stared into the elder Nimteu’s eyes as she spoke, trying to draw on her powers as a Sentinel. She willed the elder Nimetu to do what she wanted. It stood still, grin frozen on its broadening face, as though in its thoughts it could hardly move. The smell of fake mud and water was almost overpowering by that point. Lottie waited.

Then the elder Nimetu’s grin widened even more. And Lottie felt vibrations against her mind. She whipped her head from one side to another, looking into the mist.

“No,” the elder Nimetu said, crouching low, bending all its knees and elbows as though it were about to leap. “No, that is a human thing. I know that saying, I do. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ But we are the Nimetu, and we are monsters.”

“We?” Sylvester whispered.

Lottie could see as well as feel them now. She cursed herself for not noticing that the smell wasn’t from the Nimetu in front of her. It was from the ones approaching her.

“Yes, we are monsters,” the elder Nimetu said again. The approaching Nimetu surrounded them now, all elders, all many-legged and long-armed. Lottie turned back to

the closest one, the one who had tricked them. Its grin wrapped over halfway around its head now, so when it spoke, its face opened and closed like the lid on a box. “We are monsters. And monsters do not help humans. No. We eat them.”

Chapter 16
In Which There is Flight

“We’re surrounded,” Sylvester said.

Lottie didn’t bother to point out how obvious that statement was. She was too busy looking for weak points in the chain, places where they might break through. Most of the Nimetu were within range of her bow now, but there were too many of them for her to take them all on, even with Death’s help. There were dozens. Maybe more.

Lottie swung back to the nearest elder, the one they’d been talking to, and trained her arrow on it.

“Tell them to back off,” she ordered.

The elder Nimetu laughed again. It looked like some grotesque hand puppet, its mouth opening impossibly wide. Lottie wondered if she could fit her whole head in the creature’s mouth, and then decided not to find out.

“That is a human thing,” it said. “The Nimetu do not bow to leaders. We are each our own, our very own. I may have invited them here, but I cannot tell them what to do now. Nor would I.”

The other Nimetu laughed too. Lottie turned her bow around to aim at them, to try to capture them with her gaze as she had the younger ones. Then she saw a flicker of movement, and swung back around. The monster they had spoken to was moving toward them, many joints bending and flexing gracefully, too fast to see, as it lunged.

Then it stopped. It looked down at its chest where Lottie’s arrow had buried itself. Lottie pulled another arrow from her quiver and took aim again, but the creature was already falling to the ground, snarling as it died.

Lottie didn't have time to be pleased with herself; the other Nimetu were hissing angrily and closing in fast. She whipped around, pointing her bow at all of them in turn. Each time the arrow trained on one, it hesitated, but then she had to move on to the next and the one who had paused was free again. Lottie turned round and round, but she could barely slow them. She released an arrow and it struck home in another monster. It fell. She hit another. And another. This slowed the others even more, but they didn't stop. They were close now. Soon they would be close enough for Death to reach them with his scythe. Lottie wracked her brain for something else to do, some way to get out.

Then her bow sent a hum up her arm. It was so surprising that she released the arrow she'd nocked without really aiming. The arrow hit a Nimetu in one of its many knees and it stopped, wailing. But Lottie wasn't paying it any mind. She was focused on her bow.

It hummed again, gently, low at first and then at a slightly higher pitch at the end, like it was asking a question.

It is asking a question, Lottie thought.

It hummed again and even though there were no words, Lottie could feel what it meant to say now. It was asking what she wanted.

What I want is to be able to fly, Lottie thought, wryly, as she tried to think of something useful to ask of the bow. Perhaps it could shoot more arrows at once?

But the bow hummed again, and this time it wasn't a question. It was a deep thrum, like a purr. And then it began to float upwards, suddenly light as a balloon. It pulled her hand with it. As it got higher, it began to pull harder, like it had gone from being a balloon to being a kite.

"Everyone, grab onto my bow," Lottie yelled.

“Why?” Sylvester asked, panicked, wide eyes looking from the encroaching Nimetu to her.

“Just do it,” Philomena said, wrapping her own hand around the bow.

Sylvester did, just as the bow rose high enough to pull them off their feet. He gave a little gasp of surprise, and reached up to take hold with his other hand too. The Nimetu shrieked and ran faster, practically flying over the ground now.

“Death!” Lottie called.

They were above his head now, Lottie’s feet barely level with his scythe blade. Death looked up, nodded, and squatted low. The Nimetu were nearly upon him. Then Death launched himself into the air. He caught the very end of Lottie’s bow with the crook of his scythe. Lottie gasped, afraid the blade would cut right through the wood, but it didn’t. As they rose even further into the air, Death wrapped himself more comfortably around the handle of the scythe.

Below them, the Nimetu writhed with rage, shrieking and snarling and calling out obscene words that made Lottie blush. But only moments later, they were swallowed up by the fog and the ground was entirely out of sight.

The bow hummed again, asking. Lottie didn’t have to wonder this time. It could only be asking where she’d like to go.

Take us close to the younger Nimetu’s Home, she thought at it. But not close enough that we’ll be seen.

Gently, the bow glided back in the direction from which they had come. It moved swiftly—much faster than they had been walking—but not so quickly that the wind forced

Lottie to squint. Only Death, holding onto his scythe, blocked Lottie's view of what lay ahead; Sylvester and Philomena were both behind her.

Slowly, the sound of howling Nimetu faded and Lottie managed to get her pounding heart under control again, but that only made it possible for her to notice how much her fingers were starting to hurt from holding so tightly to the flying bow. And she didn't even have the backpack—Sylvester had that. She tried to think of how far they had walked to get to the elder Nimetu and had to settle for a rough estimate. And Sylvester had said that her father and Joyce were being held a few miles from where they came out of the Bridge. So that meant if she really wanted to get there, she would have to hold on for some time. Lottie's stomach gave an unhappy lurch. She wouldn't be able to hold on that long. They would have to walk soon.

"I can't hold on much longer," Philomena said, echoing Lottie's thoughts.

"Me either," Sylvester said. "My fingers keep slipping."

"Okay," Lottie said, "I'll try to get the bow to get back to the ground."

Never mind about the Nimetu's Home, she thought at her bow. We can't make it all the way there. Land. Please land.

For a moment, it seemed like the bow hadn't heard her. Lottie's fingers screamed silently. Then, as though regretfully, the bow slowed to a halt and started to descend. Everyone was quiet while they sank back into the fog. Lottie tried to focus all her attention on her fingers and holding onto the grip of the bow. The more she paid attention to them, the more they hurt, but Lottie was afraid that to lose her concentration was to lose her grip entirely. Her shoulders began to hurt and Lottie remembered how she'd never been very good at the monkey bars on the playground. She wished she'd practiced on them more.

“Are we almost there?” Sylvester asked.

“I have no idea,” Philomena said.

Both their voices sounded strained, like they were talking through clenched teeth. Lottie heard Sylvester take a deep breath, like he was about to say something else. Instead he gave a startled yelp that turned into a scream as he fell. Lottie took her eyes off her fingers and looked down, just in time to see him disappear into the mist, flailing his arms and legs, trying to climb back up to the relative safety of the bow. Then she heard a thump and another cry and she knew he’d hit the ground.

“Sylvester?” Death called, quietly.

“I think I broke my leg,” Sylvester said in reply. His voice shook.

“I am on my way,” Death said, and somehow unhooked his scythe from the bow with a little hop. He too disappeared into the mist. Lottie panicked a little before she remembered that Death wasn’t really a young boy. She wondered how much he could survive, if he had to. Another soft thump told Lottie that he’d reached the ground. She heard murmuring and whimpering.

It wasn’t long before Lottie and Philomena had sunk low enough that they could see Sylvester and Death. Death was helping Sylvester to move to one side so that Lottie and Philomena wouldn’t land on him. Once they were out of her way, Lottie released the bow, unable to hold on a moment longer. It wasn’t that far of a fall anymore, but her ankle twinged as she landed anyway. She winced, but the pain subsided quickly. Philomena landed just behind her.

Lottie sensed the bow falling and reached up with her sore right arm just in time to catch it. Death was still crouching next to Sylvester in the grass. They had all landed

precariously close to the edge of a mirror with a slippery, polished plastic frame, but at least no one had fallen in. Lottie didn't want to know what happened when you fell into a mirror pond.

"I do not think it is broken," Death was saying. "He can still move the toes. What is the word—sprained? Or perhaps there is a small fracture in the bone? There are so many little bones in the human ankle."

They tried to get Sylvester standing, but he couldn't put much weight on the foot without enough pain to make him cry out. Death helped him to sit back down and Philomena thought to look in the backpack; it was possible that since it still carried some residual magic from being at Kin House that it might have bandages in it. Lottie watched her, mulling something over. Something didn't feel right.

"Philomena," Lottie said. "Was that what you thought would happen? Back there?"

The teenage girl looked up from the bag and brushed a few long black strands of hair away from her face. She looked annoyed, which was, Lottie thought, how she usually looked anyway.

"I *told* you," she said, "I didn't know what was going to happen. I just knew we had to go there—that there was something we had to learn."

"And instead, we didn't learn much of anything and we nearly all got killed," Lottie said. "I'd think that Impending Doom would be something you might have noticed while you were scrying."

Philomena's eyes narrowed further and the corners of her mouth pulled down with real anger now. "Well, that just proves it—you aren't a Seer."

“It. Was. A. Trap,” Lottie said, enunciating the words carefully. “You led us straight into a trap.”

“Well, I didn’t know it was a trap, did I?” Philomena was almost yelling now and she was on her feet, glaring down at Lottie.

“Didn’t you?” Lottie shouted back. “How could you not have known?”

“How could *you* have not noticed dozens of Nimetu descending on us from all sides?” Philomena shot back. “You’re just as guilty of leading us into a trap as I am.”

Lottie felt her cheeks grow hot. That was true. Lottie should have noticed them, but she’d been confused, thinking the scent came from the one Nimteu she could see rather than all the ones she couldn’t. But she was new to her abilities. Philomena wasn’t. She was trained. Lottie let her anger overcome her shame.

“Why are you even here?” she asked. “I have to be here—I’m the Sentinel. Death had to come because he’s the only one who can really fight. We need Sylvester because he’s the best Finder. But why are you here? Sure you got us out of Kin House, but we only have your word that the Nimetu were coming. And what good are you here? You just lead us into traps.”

“I’m here because I want to help!” Philomena shouted. “And the Nimetu *were* coming for you at Kin House! Don’t you dare say they weren’t. I saved you!”

“So what did we learn then?” Lottie shot back. “On this wonderful side-quest of yours? Besides getting us lost and getting Sylvester’s ankle broken—what did we get?”

Philomena opened her mouth the say something, but Death interrupted her. “We learned that the soul shells are still here and that the Nimetu swallow the names,” he said, quietly but not gently. “We learned that if the shells are destroyed, the names die and the

Nimetu cannot use them anymore. We learned that not all the Nimetu of this world want to cross back to the human world. We learned that the ones who do—who have your parents, Lottie—are young and perhaps because of that, less experienced than the elders. Do not discount what we learned simply because you do not yet see how it will benefit our cause. No learning is ever wasted.”

Lottie felt her heart jolt behind her ribs. “*No learning is ever wasted.*” Her father said that. They were all silent for a long while. Lottie thought about the things she’d said to Philomena and realized she felt bad for saying them...a little. She still didn’t trust Philomena—she didn’t know her well enough, didn’t know what made her tick. Maybe she hadn’t led them into a trap on purpose. Maybe she had. Lottie opened her mouth to try to continue the conversation more calmly when she smelled something.

She sniffed. Yes. It was a Nimetu—maybe more than one. And it was getting stronger. A wave of guilt and fear washed over her—they must have heard them fighting.

“They’re coming,” Lottie said. “We have to move.”

“Sylvester can’t walk,” Death said.

“I can try,” he said, and began pushing himself upright.

“Even if you can walk, you can’t run,” Death said.

“And we can’t fly again,” Philomena said. “We’ll just have to come down soon anyway.”

“We have to do something,” Lottie said, her heart starting to pound. She thought she could sense half a dozen of the creatures. One or two, she could take care of, but she wasn’t sure she could handle many more than that—not without someone getting hurt. Or worse.

“I will carry him,” Death said. He stooped in front of Sylvester, and Sylvester climbed onto his back, supported by Death’s scythe under him.

“I’ll take the backpack,” Philomena added, swinging it over her shoulders.

Lottie considered protesting. It didn’t seem wise to leave all their supplies with the one person she trusted the least. But there wasn’t time to argue—the Nimetu were getting closer by the moment.

“Okay, let’s run,” Lottie said. “I’ll keep behind you so I can keep an eye out.”

“Which way?” Death asked.

Sylvester pointed. “That way.”

Lottie could almost hear the Nimetu coming for them, hear their eager breaths.

“Go!” she whispered as loudly as she dared.

They ran.

Chapter 17
In Which Philomena Says Something Unexpected

Running through the mist turned out to be almost as terrifying as facing the Nimetu. Lottie couldn't see very far in front of her—on more than one occasion, Death, who took the lead, disappeared from her sight entirely. Worse was avoiding the lakes and ponds, which dotted the landscape as though flung down by an indifferent hand. It was impossible to know when a new pond would appear in front of them and whether they would be able to move a couple of feet to one side to dodge it or if they would need to run some time along its edge, looking for the corner. Once, when the lake was quite large and the frame was wide and ornate—impossible to run on—Lottie thought the scent of Nimetu got stronger, that they were catching up. It was a great relief to find the corner.

The worst, for Lottie anyway, was trying to figure out how far behind the Nimetu were. She couldn't hear them—sound was swallowed up by the mist. She could hardly smell them because of the wind her flight created. So she had to rely on instinct, which worried her greatly, since her instincts had not worked out that well since crossing the Bridge.

Eventually, they had to rest. No amount of fear could keep them running forever. They crouched, panting, on the far side of a smaller pond, and Lottie strained all her senses for the Nimetu. When she could neither smell nor hear anything, Lottie took her bow and stared into the wood grain, slipping fairly easily into a trance. Beside the honey river, she strained again. She smelled the monsters better here and could feel vibrations on her skin when they were close, like ripples on a lake. She strained now.

And opened her eyes with a sigh.

“We lost them,” she said. “There are more—everywhere. But we lost those particular ones.”

“Then we may simply walk from here,” Death said.

Without speaking further, Death stood, Sylvester still clinging to his back, and they all began walking where Sylvester pointed. Every ten minutes by Lottie’s father’s watch, they stopped again for Lottie to do a quick trance to be sure that no Nimetu were closing in. It was slow going. Lottie wished she could stay in the trance as she walked, but knew it wasn’t possible. Not yet anyway. Perhaps one day she would be a good enough Sentinel to manage it, but for now, her abilities were desperately limited. She swallowed down guilt that she couldn’t do more.

“Hey, Lottie?” Sylvester whispered.

“Yeah?” Lottie whispered back.

Even though they knew how much the mist deadened any sounds, they still couldn’t bring themselves to speak loudly. Not when they had almost been eaten twice already—three times if they counted the Bridge.

“How did you get your bow to fly, anyway?”

Lottie sensed Death and Philomena pricking up their own ears. She hesitated a moment, not sure she wanted Philomena to know. But what choice did she have? She couldn’t ask Philomena to plug her ears whenever she had something important to discuss. So Lottie explained about the humming question and how she’d just thought about being able to fly on a whim.

“I bet that’s partly because you’ve been using it as a focus object,” he said. “So you’re both getting to know each other, in a way. I bet the better you get to know each other, the better you’ll be able to communicate with it.”

“Well, I hope that happens fast,” Lottie said. “Death? Do you have any idea what else my bow might be able to do?”

Death tilted his head to one side, but didn’t turn to look at her as he walked. When he spoke, however, he didn’t sound angry. “I am unsure. I assume that its abilities will prove to be directly linked with the hunting and killing of monsters. Thus, it shoots with great accuracy, even in untrained hands—though a great part of that is certainly your own innate abilities: hand-eye coordination, being able to judge distance and speed, that manner of thing. And this flying ability is clearly useful because it allows Sentinels to escape if they become overpowered. Perhaps your bow might also be able to camouflage itself so as to be less noticeable. Perhaps it can glow, as my scythe does, to allow you to see when it is dark. Perhaps it can conjure very fierce kittens. I really cannot say.”

Despite herself, Lottie smiled. Then she remembered something else. “The quiver is never empty,” she said. “It always has exactly five arrows in it no matter how many I take out or put back in.”

“Sounds very useful,” Death said. “You should perhaps experiment with it when we find a safe place to rest.”

“Is there a safe place?” Philomena asked. “Anywhere in this world?”

“I bet I can Find something,” Sylvester said.

They trudged on.

According to the golden hands of the watch, it was two in the afternoon. Back in the human world, the sun would have been high and hot—or at least high. In the Mirror World, however, the light never changed. Lottie looked up into the sky sometimes, but she could never see a sun. She wondered where the light came from, what there was of it. And if the day was not brightened by the sun, would it even get dark at night? Lottie hoped not. That would be one good thing about this place, that she would not have to face it in the dark.

Sylvester guided them to a peculiar spot where four mirror lakes lay very close to each other, creating a little space of bare grass, like an island, at their center. Four narrow paths of grass led to the island, but at least if Nimetu found them, they would have ample warning, and could use the bow to fly away if they could not fight their way out.

They all sank to their knees on the little island, exhausted and worried. Even Death looked wearied. It was decided that even though it was only afternoon, that they would have to take a long rest—perhaps even sleep. Lottie’s legs ached from all the walking. The muscles in her thighs twitched. It was like having tiny fireworks going off under her skin—not painful, but strange.

Philomena took off the backpack and rummaged through it. She brought out granola bars, dried fruit, and nuts and passed them around. Death snuck up to the lip of one of the mirror lakes, proclaimed that there were no bacteria in it—in fact, no life whatsoever—and that it should be safe to drink. Empty plastic bottles had appeared in the backpack and he filled them all.

Finally absolved of her need to be constantly worried and watching for any signs of monsters, Lottie realized just how hungry and thirsty she was. She ate three granola bars,

several handfuls of fruit and nuts, and drank a whole bottle of water. When she was done, she was only exhausted. Exhausted and scared. Exhausted, scared, and worried. She sniffed, suddenly aware that she was on the verge of tears.

“They killed my little brother,” Philomena said suddenly.

Everyone turned to look at her, eyes wide. Philomena was rooting through the backpack again, though Lottie wasn’t sure what she was looking for.

“It was two years ago,” Philomena continued. “I was thirteen and he was ten. One day I found him lying on the bathroom floor, eyes open. His skin was so cold. There was a handprint on the mirror over the sink. His.”

Lottie was too shocked even to cry. It took her a moment to realize Philomena was answering her question: why she had come with them across the Bridge.

“Nothing’s been the same since,” Philomena continued, still rummaging in the backpack. “Mom tries to take care of everything and everyone—volunteers at every animal shelter and soup kitchen she can find. Dad drinks in the evenings. He isn’t mean or anything, but he isn’t...” She sighed and pressed her lips together. “We’re all in the Lineage—we all *know* what really happened to him, even if that isn’t what the doctors and the police think happened. But neither of my parents are very interested in their abilities right now. So I had to be. Had to be a better Seer. I needed to find some way to...” She paused. Shrugged. Took something out of the backpack.

The thing Philomena had taken out of the backpack turned out to be a roll of bandages—the stretchy cloth kind used to wrap wrists and ankles. They worked Sylvester’s shoe off and he managed not to scream or cry, which was surprising because once they had his sock off they saw how swollen the ankle was. Lottie realized he must have been in pain

this whole time and had said nothing. None of them knew what to say to Philomena, so they didn't say anything. They focused on trying to wrap Sylvester's ankle correctly, even though none of them really knew what they were doing. Then they put his sock and shoe into the backpack.

After that Lottie said they should sleep—take a nap. They were too tired to go on and this was as safe a place as any, especially with Death to keep watch. So they curled up on the gray grass.

“I'm sorry about your brother,” Lottie whispered, after a few minutes.

Philomena was lying next to her, her back to Sylvester. The teenage girl opened her eyes.

“Thanks,” she whispered back. She didn't smile, but she didn't scowl either, which was encouraging.

“I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier too,” Lottie said. “And for saying you led us into a trap on purpose.”

“It's okay,” Philomena said.

Lottie knew it wasn't okay, not really. But she nodded, accepting Philomena's forgiveness. Philomena closed her eyes. Lottie did the same.

Chapter 18
In Which Lottie Sees More than She Wants To

Lottie woke up first, with a start. Her dreams had been filled with mist. She'd wandered through it, alone, terrified of Nimetu but not daring to call out to the others for help. In the dream, she had stumbled on the edge of one of the mirror ponds and, just as her body hit the water, arms still wildly flailing, she woke up.

As her heartbeat returned to normal, Lottie pushed herself up into a seated position. Death looked over at her from where he sat, then got up and came to sit beside her. He moved silently, Lottie realized. Had he always moved silently, or was he being especially careful here?

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, his voice little louder than a whisper.

“Not really,” Lottie said. “But I don't feel so tired anymore.”

Death nodded and looked out over the mirror pond they faced. Philomena and Sylvester breathed slowly behind them, occasionally letting out tiny snorts or moans. Lottie gazed into the mist, wishing she could see beyond it.

“We need to know where Home is,” she said, almost without thinking. “We need to know where the young Nimetu are keeping my parents and the others—where they're keeping the shells of the human souls they've taken.” She paused and Death said nothing. Lottie sighed and gestured before her with a wide sweep of her arm. “But we can't see anything through this fog!”

“I have been having similar thoughts,” Death said. “And I have, I believe, thought of something. Something to try, at any rate.”

“Like what?” Lottie asked.

“You can tell where monsters are in space. Sylvester can find things—including the location of people and structures. Philomena can see into the truth of a situation—Present Sight, though it is sometimes imprecise, as you have seen. If you can somehow link their abilities with yours, even for a short time, perhaps you can gain the knowledge we need.”

Lottie nodded, considering. Unconsciously, she reached for her bow and stroked the wood grain. Then she knew.

“We’ll all use my bow as a focus object,” she said. “Instead of Philomena with her crystal ball and Sylvester with his little cat. If we all focus on the bow, maybe we can link our trances together.”

Death smiled, and for a moment, he really looked like the little boy that he was pretending to be. His dark eyes even crinkled at the corners.

“Excellent idea,” he said.

“It’s worth a try, anyway,” came Philomena’s voice behind them.

Lottie looked over her shoulder and saw that both Philomena and Sylvester were blinking sleepily at them. Sylvester yawned and pushed himself up, gingerly moving his leg with the sprained ankle. Philomena helped to steady him. In that moment, Lottie thought they looked almost like siblings, despite the fact that Philomena had pale skin and straight black hair while Sylvester had dark skin and his black hair was short and curled tightly. It was like how Joyce was part of Lottie’s family even though she wasn’t related to Lottie. Sometimes family is because of how people behave with each other more than anything else. Even though Lottie hadn’t known Philomena or Sylvester—or Death—very long, they were beginning to feel as close as family members. She hoped that would be enough to make her idea work.

They all drank some water and rubbed the rest of the sleep from their eyes. Death said they'd only been sleeping for a little over an hour. Lottie wasn't surprised. She did feel better, but she didn't, by any means, feel well-rested.

Sylvester tried to take the lead on the trance, but was quickly overruled—it was Lottie's Sentinel abilities they needed first, since asking her bow was the only way anyone could think to do a group trance with so many different abilities. Sylvester pouted a bit and Philomena and Lottie resolutely ignored him. They decided that Death would “stay behind” to keep watch while the rest of them tried the group trance. Lottie was glad to have someone keeping an eye on their surroundings, but she wished that Death could join the trance—she wanted his guidance. But there was no help for it.

She, Sylvester, and Philomena sat in a little circle, each holding part of the bow in both their hands. Lottie's heart pounded a little louder in her ears and she took a deep breath. Then she felt that hum of a question, very faint.

Sylvester and Philomena need to do a trance with me, she thought at the bow. We need to be able to work together.

The hum lowered in pitch, as though the bow was agreeing. Lottie focused her eyes on the grain of the wood and hoped that whatever the bow was doing that it would be enough.

She slipped easily into her trance and found herself on the banks of the honey gold river, alone. Lottie took a deep breath, taking in the scents of nearby Nimetu. They weren't close enough to be a danger. The vibrations against her skin were soft, barely there at all.

So at least I don't have to worry about us being eaten right away, she thought.

“Cool,” came a voice—Sylvester's voice.

Lottie turned and there he was, sitting beside her next to the river. The golden light made his dark skin appear to glow. Sylvester looked around, up and down the river.

“This is really pretty,” he said.

Lottie smiled. *“Yeah. It is, isn’t it?”*

Then Philomena was there, on Lottie’s other side. Lottie didn’t see her appear. It was as though she’d always been there, and Lottie was only just noticing her. Philomena, too, seemed to glow in the light. Her pale skin looked like incredibly pale gold, like she’d been spun of precious metal by a master craftsman.

“Neat,” she said, looking round, and Lottie couldn’t quite tell if she was being serious.

“Okay, so what next?” Sylvester asked.

Lottie thought he still sounded petulant, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’ve done group Scryings before,” Philomena said. *“Let’s try that.”*

“Just tell us what to do,” Lottie said.

“We need a chant,” Philomena said. *“A few words that will focus all our intentions on the same thing, at the same time.”*

“So not ‘Oooooooooooooohm’?” Sylvester asked, smirking.

Philomena smiled a tiny smile. *“That won’t really cut it.”*

“What about if we chanted, ‘Home of the Nimetu’?” Lottie asked.

Philomena nodded. *“That should work. And Sylvester, you should focus on that especially so your Finding ability helps to guide us.”*

They passed glances back and forth between them for a moment, and then Lottie made a deliberate nod, already opening her mouth to speak. The other two followed suit

and they spoke in unison, carefully at first, not wanting to speak more quickly or slowly than the others.

“Home...of the...Nim...etu.”

Then less cautiously.

“Home of the...Nimetu.”

A third time.

“Home of the Nimetu.”

And they rose into the air above the golden honey river. They rose swiftly, but without wind, so it was almost as though it was the river that was falling rather than them rising. For just a moment, Lottie saw the perfect bowed shape of the river stretched out beneath them, glowing faintly, before they were flying through the air, away from it. She didn't notice the transition, but all of a sudden the golden glow of her magical trance world was gone and had been replaced by the mist of the Mirror World.

It was just like flying through the air, carried by her bow, but now there was nothing to cling to and they still made no wind. She heard Sylvester gasp as the mist appeared below them and knew he must be thinking of when he fell before. But there would be no falling this time. Their bodies were all safe on the ground already, guarded by Death and his tall, sharp scythe.

Lottie watched the ground flow by below them. She sometimes caught patches of it when they passed over areas where the fog had gone thin. After a while, she noticed things beginning to change: the ponds became closer together and started to line up. Lottie wondered if the Nimetu from Home were moving them, but couldn't think how. Then she wondered if the ponds were moving as the Nimetu changed. Usually animals adapted to

their environment, but this was not a normal place. Perhaps here the environment adapted to the monsters.

Then little stone huts began to appear beside some of the orderly mirror ponds. The farther they went, the more huts there were, some orderly and well-made, others askew, and a few even knocked to pieces, the stones strewn across the grass.

Nimteu were becoming more numerous as well. None of them looked up, even the ones looking into the reflective surfaces of the ponds. Lottie knew that logically, they couldn't see her—even she did not see their reflections in the pools. Still, it made her nervous to see so many Nimetu so close.

Then, through another bare patch—those too, were becoming more numerous all the time—Lottie saw a large hut with a low wall around it. The hut was four or five times the size of the little ones. The wall wasn't tall, but it looked heavy, somehow. Where the little huts had looked odd, this one looked ominous. Dark smears marred the stones on the walls, as though the cracks were oozing something. The doorway was large and dark, like a howling mouth. The mirror ponds around the big hut all faced it, and were closer together than Lottie had ever seen them before this, three rows of them circling the big hut.

"That must be Home," Lottie murmured, quiet to make sure none of the Nimetu heard her. *"Cheerful."*

"How much you want to bet that the soul shells are inside there?" Sylvester asked, quiet as well.

Lottie shook her head. She wouldn't bet against Sylvester the Finder on the location of anything.

“And the kidnapped Sentinels and you parents are in those rings of ponds,”
Philomena said. *“I can sense human lives there.”*

“Which one has my parents?” Lottie asked.

“I can’t tell.”

Lottie turned to look at Sylvester, but he shook his head, glowering, before she could ask the question. *“I can’t tell either,”* he said, and sounded like it half killed him to admit it. *“Maybe if I try again later, in my own trance. But there’s too many distractions now.”*

“It’s okay,” Lottie said.

They drifted closer to the big hut. It was more horrible up close. The dark smears between the stones were a brownish red that was almost colorful compared to the rest of the Mirror World. It was blood. Lottie knew it was. It smelled like blood to her Sentinel senses. Used like glue to hold the stones of the hut stable. She didn’t let herself think about whose blood it was too carefully. But she knew.

The only furnishing inside the hut was a huge net suspended from the middle of the ceiling. Inside the net were shells. They were like glass spheres that had been neatly broken in two. They were all different colors, but dull. Lottie could tell they should have been bright and alive, but instead they were broken and dull and all but lifeless.

The shells twitched sometimes. The two halves of one shell would quiver, as though trying to come together again, and then go limp. Like they’d given up. Then a different pair would twitch. They made tiny, desperate scraping sounds when they moved. Lottie felt like she could cry.

Noise behind her took her attention from the shells, and Lottie turned. Two Nimetu were approaching the hut. One carried a glowing, live soul the brilliant blue of a summer sky at noon. The other Nimetu capered around, excitedly, hissing and rubbing its many-jointed fingers together.

Lottie's mouth fell open, but she couldn't form any words. The two Nimetu passed right through herself and her companions, as though they weren't even there. Which, of course, they weren't. The Nimetu came to a stop beside the net of broken shells. The soul in the one Nimetu's hands vibrated, Lottie thought, with panic.

"When I break it open, now, you must catch the name quickly, before it escapes," it told the excited Nimetu. "If you let the name escape, we will not, not, not get you another one."

"I won't let it escape, I won't ever," the other hissed, annoyed. "Break it, Named-Robin! Break it already!"

As though it were nothing, the Nimetu the other had called Named-Robin raised the soul up, lifted its knee, and smashed the soul down onto it. The soul made a sound like shattering glass and the brightness flickered. It broke in two.

Are we really so fragile? Lottie thought, terrified and sickened.

As the glow of the soul's shell went out, Lottie saw movement inside it. It was just a flicker, but clearly the Nimetu had seen it too. It darted its hand forward so quickly that Lottie hardly saw it move and, just like that, it was holding something in its fist.

"Stuart!" the thing in the Nimetu's hand cried in a tiny, panicked voice.

Lottie could just barely see it. It glowed the same blue as the soul's shell once had, and it flailed tiny arms through the Nimetu's fingers, trying to get out. Lottie thought she caught a glimpse of a tiny, blue face, with huge, dark eyes.

"Stuart! Stuart!" it cried.

"Is...is it trying to call to us?" Sylvester whispered.

"I think that's its name," Philomena replied. *"That soul was from someone named Stuart."*

"We have to do something," Lottie whispered, seized with the need to act—to save something.

"Like what?" Sylvester asked.

But it was too late. The Nimetu shoved the name—shoved Stuart—into its mouth. For a moment, it struggled to close its lips around it.

"Do not chew, don't," Named-Robin said. "It must stay alive."

The other Nimetu glared at its fellow and, very deliberately, swallowed. Lottie nearly cried out. But what good would it do? The Nimetu stayed still for a moment, as though it were thinking.

"It hurts," it said. "I can feel it trying to escape."

"Yes, Named-Stuart," Named-Robin said. "It will always hurt. Hurt like it is trying to get out, to climb back out. That is the price of being able to stalk the mortal world."

Both Named Nimetu smiled, showing their teeth. Named-Robin with the shell handed it to Named-Stuart.

"Worth the price," it said. "Put this with the others. Close them up tight."

It plucked a bit of net with long, many-joined fingers and pulled it out and up like warm taffy, like spider web. Then with a little flick of its wrist, it created hole in the net, just big enough to drop the shell through. After dropping them in with a sad little clatter, Named-Stuart flicked its wrist again and the hole closed.

“That little Sentinel is here, you know,” Named-Stuart said. “She is here.”

“Yes,” the other replied. “Everyone knows.”

“Will we hunt her down tonight?”

“No,” Named-Robin replied. It grinned a slow, toothy grin. “Tonight we will harvest her parents.”

Lottie went cold. Had they said tonight? She tried to count how many hours stood between now and tonight, but her brain refused to do simple math. No, it said over and over, that one small word drowning out all numbers, all logic, all coherent thought. No. No. No. No.

“Yes, good, Named-Robin,” Named-Stuart said, grinning back. “That way the names of her parents can stalk, stalk, stalk her through the mists.”

No. No. No.

“Who will be the lucky two, I wonder?” Named-Stuart said.

Nononono....

“Better yet,” Named-Robin said, “who will get to be the one to claim the name of the last free Sentinel? The competition will be fierce, I believe. I do believe.”

“*No!*” Lottie screamed, the thought bursting out of her before she could stop it—without her even realizing it was about to.

The word seemed to echo across the space, through the hut, out the door, over the mirror ponds, and into the mist. Lottie froze, suddenly feeling like a rabbit that had broken cover just as an eagle began its dive.

And the Nimetu paused. They turned. Lottie felt her heart stop as their overly-bright eyes focused on her.

And they *grinned*.

Chapter 19
In Which Lottie Wishes for Light

Philomena grabbed Lottie's shoulder and suddenly they were shooting back through the air, hurtling through the fog. Lottie didn't even see her golden honey river pass by before she landed back in her own body with a thump.

It took her a few moments of panting and squinting her eyes, wondering how the whole world had gone a whitish gray, before she realized she was lying on her back in the grass. Death's pale face slid into her field of vision; his brows furrowed with worry over wide, dark eyes.

"Lottie?" he said.

There was an edge to his voice that she recognized. It was the same edge that her father's voice took on when he had been saying her name for some time and she hadn't yet responded. But where the edge in her father's voice was from annoyance, she could tell that the edge in Death's voice was from worry.

Dad, she thought, remembering. She lifted her right hand and brought it to the watch face on her left wrist.

"They're going to kill my parents tonight," she said, and her voice came out in a wheeze.

She struggled to sit up and realized she was still gasping for breath. Coming back from a trance had never hurt like this before, though she'd never come out of a trance by flying back into herself with the speed of a jet either. Death helped her to a seated position. Nearby, Sylvester and Philomena were pushing themselves up from where they had sprawled as well.

They told Death everything they'd seen and heard. At first they all spoke over each other, nearly shouting, and Death had to shush them. Philomena took the lead then, while Lottie fought to keep herself from just insisting over and over that they had to save her parents. She didn't want to let them know, but her parents were her first priority—almost her only priority. If she told them that, then they'd just try to convince her to think of everyone else who needed saving and everything else she was supposed to do. And she knew all that. She knew she had to save the other Sentinels and the whole world, knew that saving so many people—millions of them—was even more important than saving just the two people who were the most important to her. But...

But they're my parents, she thought. I can't let them die. Not for the other Sentinels. Not for the whole world. I just can't.

She rubbed her father's watch with her finger pads, like she was trying to rub away a smudge. She wondered what her mother would have done in this situation. Lottie couldn't even begin to guess and that only made her feel more lost.

Lottie *would* save everyone, she thought. She would. But first Lottie would save her parents. Then she'd be able to focus on all the rest. Once she knew that they were safe, then she'd save the other Sentinels, and after that they could all stop the Nimetu from invading the mortal world.

But she couldn't tell the others that.

“So, clearly, we must make our move tonight,” Death said, when they had finished. “Whatever it is to we do to save the mortal world, we must try to do it before the Nimetu have a chance to harm Lottie's parents.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have any way of getting close enough to do any saving,” Philomena said.

“Yeah, gee, if only we could fly,” Sylvester said. “Oh wait. We *can* fly.”

They all turned to look at him with raised eyebrows.

“And what happens if you fall and break your other ankle, pray tell?” Philomena asked.

Sylvester rolled his eyes and began rummaging through the backpack from Kin House. “Aha!” he cried, softly. He pulled out a long ball of rope from inside the bag. “I thought that if I needed it, the backpack might just make it for me, and ta-da. We’ll tie this to the bow and make swings for us to sit in. Then our fingers won’t get tired.”

“That’s...not half bad,” Philomena admitted.

“Then we can fly overhead and drop in without warning,” he continued, grinning. “Like paratroopers.”

“We’ll need a distraction, though,” Lottie said. “I think they really did see me when I shouted, so they’ll probably be expecting us to try something.”

“A distraction?” Death said. “Do you have something in mind?”

Lottie nodded, her heart beating a little faster with the excitement of the little plan that was taking form in her mind.

“I think you should go after the soul shells,” she said. “You could get in on your own—since you can’t die—and you can try to take the whole net-full away with you. That would be pretty distracting.”

“And while I am doing this, what will you three be doing?” Death asked.

“We’ll be going after the people they captured,” Lottie said. “Including my parents. I’ll take the lead and protect everyone with my bow, Philomena can help Sylvester to walk, and Sylvester can Find everyone.”

“How do we get them out of the pocket worlds, though?” Sylvester asked.

Everyone was silent for a moment, deep in thought.

“It’s just water on this side, isn’t it?” Lottie asked after a while. “I mean, we’ve been drinking it. Shouldn’t we be able to just pull them out?”

Death shook his head and spread his pale hands. “Yes, the substance in the mirror pools is only water, but the pocket worlds within that water where the captives are actually being held is not only water. It cannot be. If it were, then the people would drown.”

“But we still might be able to just pull them out,” Philomena said.

Everyone turned to look at her, eyebrows raised. Lottie’s heart began to pound harder again. Would it really be so simple to rescue her parents from their prisons?

“The pocket worlds are meant to keep the captives in, right?” Philomena went on. “They aren’t meant to keep the Nimetu from getting to them. Like the net that holds all the soul shells in without keeping the Nimetu out.”

“It makes a certain amount of sense,” Death said. “But we must remember, while the mirror ponds are filled only with water, they are still also mirrors. The reason that souls would sometimes slip into the Mirror World after a person died is because mirrors have always had the capability to steal souls. The Nimetu do not want the people in those pocket worlds to die while inside them, but it is possible that upon being removed from the pocket world, the soul of the person is stolen away and they die. The Nimetu would not mind that.

They would kill the person anyway. Perhaps it is as simple as pulling the captive out. Perhaps it is not.”

“We won’t know until we get close enough to see one,” Philomena said, nodding.

“Which means that the distraction you cause,” Lottie said, “needs to be really, really distracting—to give us the time to figure the pocket world prisons out.”

Death sighed deeply. “Indeed.”

“So...” Sylvester said. “When do we do this?”

Lottie checked the time on her father’s watch. It was now just after four in the afternoon. She didn’t know exactly what the Nimetu had meant by “tonight”—seven o’clock? Eight? Midnight? But she suspected that they couldn’t mean late afternoon.

Maybe we should try to get there just after they’ve taken Dad and Joyce out of their pocket worlds, Lottie thought. Then I won’t have to worry about how to get them out. Unless Death is right and when the Nimetu take someone out of their pocket world prison, they automatically die.

She shook her head. She couldn’t risk that.

“I think the earlier we start, the better,” she said, and her stomach lurched with fear even as she spoke the words.

There was another pause, and then the others nodded. Sylvester’s eyes were wide with fear, Lottie saw, but his jaw was clenched in determination. Philomena just looked grim.

“We still do not have a plan to remove the names from the Nimetu that have swallowed them,” Death said. “Stealing the shells will not stop them from using the names.

Freeing the captives will not stop those Nimetu that are Named already from entering the mortal world to stalk new victims.”

“I know,” Lottie replied. She allowed herself to be partially honest. “But if we wait to do the plan until we also have a plan to remove their names, then...my parents will die.” She sniffed, her eyes stinging. “Maybe one of the other Sentinels will have an idea once we get them free. But...we can’t wait.”

Death hesitated before nodding this time, and Lottie wondered if he suspected her secret plan to simply rescue her parents and then work everything else out after that. She studied his face carefully for clues about what he was thinking, but that would only get her so far, she knew. Death wasn’t really human and sometimes Death’s face didn’t do things that a real human’s face would. Still, Lottie thought that Death believed her. She willed him to believe her.

“Then let us depart,” Death said, and Lottie felt her shoulders relax even as her stomach tightened.

They spent a few minutes fashioning swing-like seats from the rope that Sylvester had pulled out of the backpack and tying the rope securely to Lottie’s bow. They decided that they would only need three swings; Death would hold onto his scythe as he had before. Then Lottie held the bow to one side and wished very hard. Before long, she felt the little humming question. She asked it, silently, to fly, and the bow rose into the air.

They didn’t have long to get into their seats, but the bow seemed to know they were having difficulty and did not hurry. Then they were in the air. Lottie held onto the bow with both hands above her head to steady herself. The rope seat—really just two loops with

nothing that could really be called a seat at all—was not comfortable or terribly stable, but it did keep all the weight off her hands.

The bow stopped rising and Lottie silently asked it to bring them to the Nimetu's Home. The bow began gliding through the air, grayish grass and mirror ponds slipping by below them. They watched in silence as the mirror ponds went from erratically strewn across the landscape to being neatly lined up. They watched in silence as the little huts began to appear, some of them broken and strewn about as though knocked over by an enormous toddler. They watched and they held their breaths, as they passed over more and more Nimetu. From above like this, they really did look like spiders scuttling across the grass, their limbs too long, their movements so quick and graceful that it was unnerving. And Lottie held her breath and tried to make no sound, to smell like nothing but fog.

There is one nice thing about there being no sun here, she reflected. We can't cast shadows on the ground below and give our position away.

But even knowing that, knowing that she was safer without the light, Lottie desperately wished it was there. It was a reflex. When she was scared, alone, at home in her bedroom, she reached for the light. The light represented safety and normalcy. Bad things were banished by the light.

Lottie knew it wasn't really true. She knew the Nimetu could come out in the light. They had come out in her backyard when she, Death, and Sylvester had returned for her bow. They had come out in the daylight to attack her home and steal away her parents. Still, Lottie's fingers itched to reach out and flip a switch.

And then, there it was beyond a hole in the mist. Home.

Lottie shuddered.

Chapter 20
In Which Not Much Goes According to the Plan

When they were just above the big hut, Death unhooked his scythe from the end of Lottie's bow and slipped down into the mist. Just before he'd completely disappeared, he looked up into Lottie's eyes. She could see he was worried, but he was also feeling something else and she couldn't tell what. Again, she hoped he hadn't guessed at her real plan.

But if he has guessed, then he wouldn't be going along with the plan, would he?
Lottie thought.

She released her grip on the bow with her right hand so she could rub the face of her father's watch with her thumb. There was nothing else to do. She'd made the plan.

"Sylvester," she whispered, very softly. "I need you to Find my parents."

She wrapped the fingers of her right hand around the bow again and reached her left hand back behind herself so that Sylvester could use her father's watch to Find him more easily. She felt him take her wrist in his hands, gently, and then become very still.

Lottie counted the seconds. One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi. When she reached sixty, she began again at one. All the while, she was watching the ground below them when the mist allowed for it and straining her senses as a Sentinel for any sign of Nimetu attention.

At one minute and thirty-two seconds, she heard hissing and shrieking beneath them and her heart leapt up into her throat. Then she realized it must be that Death was beginning the distraction. The Nimetu would be far too busy now to notice three children hovering above them. She watched through a hole in the mist as Nimetu began racing toward the big hut.

“Got them,” Sylvester said behind her and she felt his hands releasing hers. She pulled her hand back. “They’re off to the left a ways, in a big mirror pond with a brass frame.”

Lottie communicated this to her bow, urging it to hurry, and they flew through the air. This time, instead of coming to a stop and then slowly lowering itself down, the bow glided downward like an eagle coming down to land. The mist swirled around them for a moment, and then they were so near the ground that Lottie gasped. The bow slowed abruptly, making them rock in their rope swings, as they reached the edge of a mirror pond with a brass frame.

Lottie tumbled out of her swing and moved to the edge of the pond. She scanned around her for Nimetu, but there were none. Clearly Death was being very distracting back at the big hut. Lottie peered into the water and there!

There they were. Joyce and her father, both cradled in huge bubbles below the water’s surface. Their eyes were closed. They could be sleeping.

“Here,” Philomena whispered beside her and pressed something into Lottie’s hand.

It was her bow. She’d forgotten to grab it in her rush to get to the pool’s edge. Lottie took it, feeling a little guilty for forgetting it. But mostly her mind was whirling around the problem of how to get her parents out alive and safe.

Lottie knelt at the very very edge of the pond, her knees brushing the edge of the water and sending little ripples across the surface. She took a breath, her heart racing, and she reached into the water toward her father. Her fingers grazed the bubble that surrounded him.

She drew her hand back with a sharp gasp. Touching the bubble hadn't hurt, exactly. It hadn't hurt, but it had been terrible. In that fraction of an instant, she knew that no good could come of touching that bubble. Her lower lip began to tremble.

"Dad?" she whispered.

She looked at his face, disfigured from the ripples that her hand had caused. His eyes were closed. He didn't hear her.

"Daddy?" she whispered again, more urgently.

Still nothing. And why should he hear her? This was magic, she knew. People didn't escape from magic curses just because you called them. Lottie couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. How could she have thought that she would just be able to figure this out if only she could get close enough?

"What's his name?" Philomena asked.

Lottie sniffed. "Why?"

"Names have power, don't they?" she said. "Try calling him by name."

Lottie had to think for a moment. She never called her father by name. Joyce called him by his name. Lottie called him "Dad." That was how things were. Calling him by his name felt odd, almost wrong. Lottie felt like he would be annoyed with her.

But he's trapped in a bubble in a world of monsters, she thought. How mad could he really get?

"Benjamin," Lottie whispered, very very softly.

His eyes opened.

Lottie gasped. Her father blinked, once, and then turned his head to look up at her. He squinted and she saw his lips form her name. He reached a hand up toward her and suddenly the bubble around him burst.

His eyes went wide and the water churned as he fought his way to the surface. The splash when he burst up and out was almost deafening. Lottie knew she should look around to see if any Nimetu had heard the sound and come to investigate, but she couldn't.

"Lottie," her father said and swam the short distance to where she knelt.

"Daddy," she said in a choked little whisper. Her eyes burned and her throat tightened up.

He reached up a hand and stroked her hair. A confused smile tickled the edges of his mouth, but it died before it was fully formed. His eyes went wide, as though he suddenly remembered what had happened to him.

"Lottie, you have to run," he said. "There are monsters. Run and find someone to call the police."

"Sorry, Benjamin, but there aren't any police here," Sylvester said, bending down over Lottie so her dad could see him. "We're the rescue party."

"Come on, Dad," Lottie said. She pulled gently on his arm. "Get out of there so we can get Joy—"

"Lottie," he said again, pushing himself up out of the mirror pool with a great crashing of water. "Lottie, the monsters—"

"It's okay," Lottie said. "We made a distraction."

"Not distracting enough," came a voice behind them. "Not by half."

Lottie whirled around—or tried to. She was holding onto her father’s arms in an attempt to keep him from falling back into the pond. By the time she managed to turn around, she was facing a wall of grinning Nimetu headed straight for her.

She tried to haul her father out of the water and reach for her bow at the same time, but it was no use. The Nimetu were on them before she could do either. Long-fingered hands closed around her arms and tangled in her hair. Long-fingered hands wrenched the bow out of her tenuous grasp. They wrested her away from her father. Away from Sylvester and Philomena.

Lottie fought and struggled. She tried to stare at them in that way that made them freeze. But they had caught her unaware. She didn’t have the focus to do anything but twist in their hands, and even that she could not continue for long because it caused them to wrench her hair painfully. Tears stung her eyes again, this time from pain.

This is how they killed the other Sentinels, she thought.

For seconds—maybe less—the world was a sea of grasping hands and knees and teeth. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. Lottie was held fast between two Nimetu, as were her father and Philomena. Sylvester thrashed in the pool. He must have tripped and fallen in. Nimetu gathered at the water’s edge and reached their long arms toward him to drag him out.

“To be fair—entirely fair,” the Nimetu who had first spoken went on, as though nothing had happened. “The distraction was very distracting. If we hadn’t been expecting you, we certainly would have gone to see what the little scythe-wielder was doing. We certainly would have. But...we knew you would come. So we made sure it was you who was distracted, little Sentinel.”

Lottie's heart sank and she hung in her captors' arms. They had known she was coming. Of course they had known. She'd known they had seen her, had known they would be expecting her to try something. Why had she thought they would be so easily tricked?

How could I have been so stupid?

"Leave my daughter alone!" her dad shouted. "She's just a little girl."

"Oh, but she isn't just a little girl, is she?" the Nimetu asked, stalking close to him and reaching out to stroke his face.

Lottie wanted to call out—wanted to tell her father not to speak, not to make them angry, not to put himself in any more danger. But she didn't. What good would it do? And what would the two Nimetu who held her do to her if she tried to call out? The thought made her heart beat wildly, made her breath come fast and hard.

"No, no, no," the Nimetu continued. "She's much more than that, isn't she? She is. She is a Sentinel. The last free Sentinel. She was your only hope, she was, but what a little thing to be the only hope. It is no wonder she failed. It is no wonder she walked into our Home and failed to rescue her parents, failed to save the others, failed at it all. Little girl. Little girl Sentinel."

Nimetu lifted Sylvester from the pool and he thrashed and swung at them, creating a shower of droplets. He couldn't reach them, of course. Their arms were over twice as long as his. The image of him, of Sylvester struggling ineffectually like an angry kitten, just made Lottie sadder. How could any of them have thought that they stood a chance against a world full of monsters?

“Death is going to be here any second,” Sylvester yelled as the Nimetu who had fished him out of the water plopped him down on the ground and held him fast. “You just wait! He’ll cut you to ribbons!”

The Nimetu all laughed.

“No, little human,” another Nimetu said. “Death cannot kill us, cannot cut us down into ribbons.”

“And even if he could—” yet another chimed in.

“Yes, even if he could,” the first agreed.

“He’s in no position to try it. No he is not. We trapped him in the net—the net that holds the shells.”

“We didn’t know it would hold him,” one monster said. “But it does. It holds him just fine. The shell of human life and death.”

And the Nimetu laughed and laughed and laughed.

Lottie watched Sylvester and Philomena struggle in the grasp of the monsters that held them, unable to break free and yet still fighting. She saw her father throwing himself against the strong hands of his captors, trying to get to her, shouting again, shouting for the Nimetu to at least let Lottie go. To take him instead of her.

But Lottie didn’t fight. She couldn’t bring herself to. She fought only the lump in her throat that threatened to rise up and push the tears out of her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she whispered, too quiet for anyone to hear.

The Nimetu dragged them all back toward the edge of the mirror pools. Lottie didn’t struggle.

“Put them all into pockets,” cried a monster.

“We’ll make a banquet of them all this night!” agreed another.

“No! No!” shouted Sylvester.

“Don’t!” screamed Philomena.

“Lottie! Lottie!” called her father.

Lottie didn’t cry out.

One by one, Lottie watched the others being thrown into the mirror ponds. Just as they hit the surface, the Nimetu cried a word she didn’t know and a thick, syrupy bubble surrounded them and dragged them down under the water’s surface.

Then it was her turn. Lottie’s heart hammered in her chest and the tears trickled down her cheeks, unstoppable. She didn’t fight.

She was lifted, arms crushed between long, cruel fingers. “The last free Sentinel!” the Nimetu cried. They tossed her like a toy. She heard herself scream.

Then there was a jolt of hitting the water and another, thick jolt of being suddenly surrounded. Then there was sinking and descending into darkness.

Then there was nothing.

Chapter 21
In Which the World Crumbles into Dust

Lottie and her father sat on a big, flat rock that jutted out into the river. The air smelled like river water and mud: heavy, sharp, and rich. It was close enough to the water that they could watch what was happening under the surface easily. Lottie stared and stared, but nothing was happening under the surface, nor on the surface. The water was completely empty of anything living.

“Find anything yet?” Joyce asked from her seat on the river bank nearby.

“No,” Lottie called back.

She felt an itching in the back of her mind. She could smell something wrong here. River smells, but wrong. Her heart began to pound.

“I think we should leave now,” she said, looking up from the water.

“No chance,” her father said from his side of the rock. “Not until we find something.”

“You have time, Lottie,” Joyce added. “There’s no rush.”

There was a rush, Lottie knew, but she couldn’t be sure why. The breeze carried more wrong smells to her nose and that made her heart pound harder. She wanted to be running. Something was coming. Something she couldn’t fight.

But you can’t tell them that, she thought. They won’t believe you without proof.

She was sick of staring into the clear, dead water. She looked at Joyce. Joyce was sitting cross-legged on the grass, rubbing her huge stomach gently, like she was stroking the hair of the twins inside.

“After the twins come out,” Lottie asked, “could they ever get back in again?”

Joyce laughed. “No, of course not. Once they’re out, they have to grow up. That’s how it works.”

“What if they didn’t belong out?” Lottie asked.

She was onto something. These questions were important, but she didn’t know why. The smells on the breeze were wrong and dangerous and meant something was coming and she didn’t know why. She asked questions quickly, desperately, because she knew they did not have plenty of time.

“What do you mean, Miss Lottie?” her dad asked, coming to sit next to her.

Lottie sighed and tried to order her thoughts. “What if something came out of where it was, but I needed to be able to put it back, even if it seems impossible?”

The grass around them was slowly becoming a golden brown instead of green, slowly dying. The sky above was clouding over, slowly enough that it didn’t seem to be happening, quickly enough to be frightening. The smells were getting stronger—the wrong ones.

Lottie’s father rubbed his chin, the way he did when he was thinking. She wanted him to think faster—there wasn’t time! But he didn’t seem to realize it. Around them the world shriveled up.

“Can you give me an example?” he asked, finally.

Lottie wracked her brain. “Like the caddisfly larve,” she said. “What if a predator managed the get one out of its little castle armor? How would we put it back?”

“I suppose it would just go back in on its own,” he father replied. “That’s where it belongs, after all.”

“But it’s being held by the predator,” Lottie said.

“You’ll have to get the predator to let it go,” Joyce said.

The grass she was sitting on was now a brownish gray and slowly crumbling into dust. The sky above was dark like iron. The wind had picked up and the wrong smells of river were so strong, Lottie could feel them in her nostrils. She could feel vibrations on her skin too and she could almost hear something...the dangerous thing that was coming.

“We have to leave,” Lottie said. She grabbed her father’s hand and pulled him up. “They’re coming.”

“Who’s coming, Miss. Lottie?” he asked as she dragged him toward Joyce.

“The monsters,” Lottie replied, without thinking. But she suddenly knew it was true.

Lottie’s father laughed and Joyce hid a smile behind her hand. “Sweetie, there are no monsters coming. You must have been having a nightmare.”

“No, I wasn’t!” Lottie shouted. “I’m not, I mean! It’s real—it’s all real!”

“No, Lottie,” Joyce said. She stood up and what remained of the powdered grass beneath her was gathered up by the wind and blew away. “No, Lottie,” Joyce said again. “It isn’t real. It’s a nightmare.”

Lottie’s mouth dropped open to argue, but the words hit her with a thump. She realized it was true. She remembered. She wasn’t by the river with her parents. She was in the Mirror World. She was trapped. Alone.

She looked around her. The wind blew dust everywhere so she could hardly see. But across the river she could just make out the outlines of Nimetu stalking up and down the riverbank. She swallowed. Hard.

“How do I get the predator to drop the caddisfly larve so it can go back to its shell?” she asked.

Her father—but he was only her dream-father—shrugged and stroked her hair. “It depends on what kind of predator, I suppose. You need something that will scare it or hurt it enough that it can’t help letting it go. What do you know about the predator?”

Lottie watched the dim shapes of Nimetu through the wind and dust. She wondered what would happen if they crossed to her side. Her heart pounded, pounded, pounded in her ears.

“They love mirrors,” she said. “They live in a world of them. They use them to hunt.”

“No problem then,” her father replied, looking relieved. “Just use mirrors against them to make them drop the caddisfly larve.”

“Dad, I just said they loved mirrors,” Lottie said. “How could I use mirrors against them if they live on them?”

He shrugged. “You need water to live,” he said, reasonably. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t drown.”

Joyce reached down and wrapped her hand around Lottie’s arm. Lottie could feel her trembling.

“Save us, Lottie,” she whispered. Her eyes were wide now, with fear. “You have to save us. Use your bow—your mother’s bow.”

Suddenly Lottie heard a now-familiar hum. She looked down and there was her bow and her quiver, laying on the ground at her feet.

“I can’t,” Lottie said. She didn’t try to pick them up. “I tried and I couldn’t do it.”

“Then try again,” Lottie’s father said. His eyes too, were filled with fear now.

Lottie looked across the river and saw that the Nimetu were coming toward them. She wanted to reach for her bow, but stopped herself.

I left it on the ground, she remembered. I dropped it and the Nimetu got it. That’s only a dream-bow.

“Pick it up,” a voice said.

Lottie looked up and there she was. Lottie didn’t have to ask even. She recognized her own mother.

The tall, red-headed woman smiled down at her. The wind didn’t seem to touch her, didn’t mess up her hair, didn’t make her squint to protect her eyes from the dust. She just smiled. Calm. Like she had all the time in the world.

“I can’t,” Lottie said. Her hands itched to feel the wood and leather of the weapons again, but she didn’t dare.

“Why not?” her mother asked.

“I dropped them before,” Lottie said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. I should have known better.”

Her mother shook her head, smile broadening. “Even monkeys fall out of trees,” she said. “That doesn’t mean they weren’t born to climb them.”

Lottie looked down at the bow and quiver. Slowly, so slowly, she bent down, wind and dust howling through her hair, past her ears. She reached out and wrapped her fingers, one at a time, around the bow and the quiver. Picked them up.

Then, without thinking, she whirled and released five arrows one after the other into the swirling wind. She watched as the Nimetu across the river stopped and dissolved,

carried off by the wind just as easily as the powdered grass had been. Lottie took another arrow and shot it straight down into the water.

Ripples of gold appeared where the arrow hit. The gold spread, faster and faster. It was the same honey color of the wood grain in her bow. First the water changed, then the rock, then the grass, on and on, until the wind calmed and died. The sky was honey gold now. Little honey colored water striders skimmed across the water's surface. Golden fish swam up and down the river.

Lottie turned back to her parents, to her mother.

"You're not done," her mother said.

Lottie nodded. "I know."

"You have to wake up now," her father said.

Lottie nodded again. But she couldn't leave just yet. She walked up to the woman who was her mother, who had her red, curly hair and her green eyes, and she hugged her. Her mother hugged back.

"I wish I remembered you better," Lottie said.

"It's okay," her mother replied. "I remember you."

"Why didn't you leave me anything?" Lottie asked, not angry, but rather sad. "Why didn't you leave me a letter or a note or anything?"

"I left you everything you needed," she answered. "I left you your bow and your arrows. I left you your abilities. I left you your wonderful, brilliant father, who brought you a kind, caring step-mother. I left you my red hair. And I left you my love."

Lottie nodded. Yes. That was everything she really needed.

“You have to wake up now,” her mother whispered. “You have to go save the world. Use your bow. Use the mirrors. Use what you know.”

“I promise,” Lottie whispered.

* * *

And then Lottie opened her eyes.

Chapter 22
In Which Lottie Happens to the Bad Things

Lottie opened her eyes and realized that her bow and quiver were in her hands. The second thing she realized was that water was pouring into the bubble from the fist-sized hole that the bow had made getting in to her. She nearly panicked and dove directly for the surface, but she stopped herself.

How could she use mirrors against the Nimetu? She thought for several very, very long moments as water poured in on her. She was sitting cross-legged on the bottom of her bubble, and the water was quickly filling up to lap at her knees. It wasn't until it got to her waist that her bow made a hum—that hum of a question.

Then she had it.

I need arrows that are tipped with mirrored arrow heads, she thought at it. Mirror arrow heads that can steal the names right back out of the Nimetu.

The bow hummed again, agreeing. Lottie pulled an arrow out of the quiver and inspected it. The water was up to her elbows. The arrowhead gleamed bright and sharp in the dull light of the underwater bubble. She saw the reflection of her eye in it. She grinned and saw her teeth.

Lottie slung the quiver back over her shoulder and, bow and arrow in hand, she took a deep breath and pushed through the tear in the bubble. She kicked her way to the surface—it wasn't so far away actually. She broke the water's surface with a gasp, at the same time bringing her newly tipped arrow to her bow, and drawing it back to her chin.

She released the arrow and it buried itself in the chest of an angry-looking Nimetu that had been standing at the edge of her pond. The monster clutched at its mouth rather than its chest, but it was too late. The name inside it burst out.

“Tansy!” the name cried as it flew up into the air and away, toward the big hut.

“Tansy! Tansy!”

The Nimetu she’d shot fell. But before it hit the ground, it melted, suddenly nothing more than water, and splashed dully on the grass.

Lottie was already up and out of the mirror pond by the time any more Nimetu could come running. She drew her bow again, nocking another mirror-tipped arrow. The Nimetu who had been rushing toward Lottie froze.

“You can’t shoot us all,” one of them hissed.

But Lottie wasn’t listening. She focused her best monster-freezing glare on them, but with her mouth she called out loudly, as loudly as she could:

“Sentinels!”

Even in the mist, her cry echoed across the land. The Nimetu cringed.

“Sentinels!” Lottie called again.

It wasn’t their individual names, she knew. But she also knew, knew without knowing how, that this was a different sort of magic for a different kind of name. Each time she called out, she felt her bow hum with her, call with her.

“Sentinels!” she cried a third time.

“It isn’t working!” taunted one of the monsters.

They began to advance again, slowly, because she was still glaring at them, but advancing nonetheless. It wasn’t a moment, however, before they could all hear the splashing.

The Nimetu turned to look around themselves. So did Lottie, just for a second.

In every single mirror pond, the water splashed and rippled around a struggling Sentinel. Each Sentinel swam to the edge and dragged herself up and out. Lottie could feel them all making their own silent calls. Then the air was filled with bows and quivers. They appeared as if from nowhere, but they all had very clear destinations.

“Make the arrows mirror-tipped!” Lottie cried.

“No!” a Nimetu shrieked. “No, no, no, *no!*”

The other Sentinels took up Lottie’s cry. Between one heartbeat and another, the world seemed to erupt into chaos. Nimetu shrieked. Sentinels cried out, called to each other. Sometimes screamed.

Half a dozen Nimetu converged on Lottie, arms extended to make a fence of their fingers so she couldn’t escape. They narrowed their too-bright eyes in rage and opened their too-wide mouths to show their many, many pointed teeth. Lottie still had her back to the mirror pond she’d climbed out of. She had nowhere to run.

But she didn’t want to run. Finally, it wasn’t bad things happening to Lottie. Lottie was now happening to *them*.

She nocked and loosed arrows from her bow so quickly that the Nimetu didn’t even have time to react before they were clutching at their mouths, trying to keep the names in. The names darted through their many-jointed fingers and leapt into the air. “Jane!” “Fred!” “Tyron!” “Toby!” “Chandra!” “Nova!” they cried.

The Nimetu melted into puddles, one after another, like horrible snow monsters exposed to a blast furnace.

More Nimetu appeared behind them, rushing at Lottie, howling. She released arrow after arrow, and each one hit home. But there were too many and her untrained arms were already beginning to tire.

Then a Nimetu threw up its arms, shot in the back. Then another. Then another. Lottie realized that other Sentinels were protecting her. She looked around. A woman about Joyce's age with incredibly long black hair and a Hawaiian print sarong stood on the raised edge of one of the mirror pond's frames, shooting with one eye tightly closed. Another woman, this one younger—perhaps only a little older than Philomena—blonde and wearing a pink pantsuit stood off in the other direction in a wide space of gray grass. Lottie bet her makeup had been perfect once, but the water had caused it to streak down her cheeks like war paint.

“Hey!” the blonde woman yelled and released two more arrows into two more Nimetu. “You keep your slimy hands off of her!”

Lottie grinned at them, extremely grateful for the help. “Thanks!” she called.

Then she had another idea.

“Death!” she called. “The Anthropomorphized Manifestation of Both Life and Death!”

Lottie heard more Nimetu shrieking from the direction of the big hut and knew that Death was free. Then she heard rumbling and looked just in time to see the top of the big hut burst open like a volcano. Death leapt out and the names poured in.

Death made his way to her side, swinging his great, sharp scythe to clear the monsters from his path and herd them into the path of waiting Sentinels and their arrows.

“Thank you, Lottie,” he said when he reached her.

“No problem,” Lottie replied.

They stood side by side and any Nimetu Lottie couldn't shoot in time, Death drove back with his scythe, where other Sentinels took care of them. One after another, the Nimetu melted into puddles.

Lottie didn't know how long the battle lasted. Her fingers and arms ached so badly that it might have been hours. But eventually, there were no more Nimetu to shoot. The Mirror World fell back into eerie silence. The grass was sopping wet.

She lowered her bow, panting.

“Is it over?” she asked.

As if to answer, glowing souls came floating out of the big hut, the shells newly reunited with their names. They swam through the air like fish, slowly making their way toward Death and Lottie. As they got closer, Lottie could hear them softly whispering their names.

Rebecca. Terrence. Wade. Lavon. Elizabeth. Betty. Carly. Ahmed. Cassandra. Shannon. Yolanda. Nick. Julia. Chris. Kory....

Then she saw other souls out on the battlefield, hovering just above the bodies of Sentinels. Her eyes stung to see them. Not many Sentinels had died in the battle. Her plan had been a great success and they had lost far, far fewer than the Named Nimetu had lost. But still.

Lottie felt a little tug of guilt, and reached for her father's watch. That was when she remembered:

“I need to free my parents,” she said to Death.

“And your friends,” Death added.

But Lottie paused, rubbing her father's watch with her thumb. She looked around. The glowing, floating souls that were slowly drifting closer. The other Sentinels as they help each other up and talked softly, stroked each other's hair and gripped each other's shoulders. The puddles of water that was all that was left of the Named Nimetu.

"Death?" she whispered.

"Yes, Lottie?"

"I really did it," she said. "Didn't I? I really saved the world."

Death smiled. It was a comforting sight.

"Almost," he replied. "You still have to get everyone back to the mortal world. But you can manage that."

Now Lottie smiled.

Chapter 23
In Which Lottie Decides Who to Be

Lottie didn't have to search long to find the mirror ponds where Sylvester and Philomena were being held. She called their names and her friends came gasping up to the surface.

"I dreamed that I couldn't Find anything," Sylvester said. "Not my dad or my house or you or anything. I've never been lost, and there were monsters everywhere. I couldn't Find anything, but they kept finding me."

"I dreamed of my brother," Philomena said. "I dreamed that I met him at the gates of death and he was...he was so disappointed in me that I hadn't stopped the Nimetu from taking other lives. He said I should have known—I should have Seen this all coming."

Lottie reached out and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. She smiled. "Sorry I didn't get you out sooner," she said. "But it's almost over now."

They nodded and helped her to find her parents again. Lottie called her father's name and Joyce's, and all three children helped the shaky adults to clamber out of the mirror ponds. Joyce, especially, had a difficult time with her huge belly.

"Lottie?" Joyce said, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "What happened? Where are we?"

Lottie hesitated for a moment. "Well, you were kidnapped by monsters," she said. "And now you're in their world. But it's okay. I rescued you. Well, we did."

Joyce wiped the wet hair out of her face and looked around.

By that time, the rest of the Sentinels had gathered around them: women of all shapes, sizes, and ages. Some spoke with thick accents. Some were older than Lottie's father, while others were not that much older than Philomena. Not one was Lottie's age.

“Oh,” Joyce said.

“It’s a lot to take in,” Lottie’s father said, coming to her side. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“Nope,” Joyce said. “I should do this.”

She bent down and wrapped her arms around Lottie, hugging her so tightly that Lottie forgot the ache in her arms. She closed her eyes and hugged Joyce back. Then she felt her father wrap his arms around both of them. Slowly, they sank to the ground, still hugging, and for the first time in days, Lottie felt warm and safe.

Dimly, Lottie heard Death filling in the other Sentinels on some of the details of the past week, and introducing them to Sylvester and Philomena, but they had all known without being told that Lottie was the one who had woken them up from their prisons and Lottie was the one who had called out instructions to them once they were out. None of them interrupted Lottie and her parents though. They kept back, murmuring to each other in shaky, relieved voices.

After a long time, Joyce and her father let Lottie go. Joyce stroked Lottie’s cheek. “Thanks for coming to get us, dearheart,” she said.

“I always knew you were brave,” Lottie’s father said.

Lottie blushed. Her father brushed his fingers against the watch on her wrist.

“You still have it,” he said.

“Oh,” Lottie said. “Right.” She took it off and held it out for him. Water dripped off it. “It got kinda wet when I escaped the pocket world. But it’s been really useful up till now. Can it be fixed?”

“I don’t think we should fix it,” he replied, taking the watch and turning it over in his hand. “I think we should frame it. Like a trophy.” He leaned down and kissed her head. “We can have a little plaque engraved: *This Watch Worn by a Real Life Hero*. What do you think?”

“I like it,” Lottie said.

Joyce kissed his cheek and then Lottie’s and they all untangled themselves and stood. Then the other Sentinels came closer, all wanting to meet Lottie. Some hugged her. A few shook her hand like she was a grown up. All smiled and laughed and told her parents what an amazing child they had—how Lottie had saved them all, saved everything.

“I can hardly believe that a child Sentinel without any guidance from another Sentinel managed to do all that you have done,” said a tall Sentinel with very dark skin and a broad, white smile. “Truly, you are an extraordinary girl, little Lottie.”

“Well,” Lottie said. “I *did* have a little guidance.”

She introduced her parents properly to Death, Sylvester, and Philomena. Her parents took some convincing that Death was who he said he was—especially her father—but a few quick shapeshifts brought them around. Then Lottie told them all about her dream, in which her mother—or maybe only a dream version of her mother, anyway—came to offer her advice.

Lottie’s father and Joyce shook their heads. “I think we were too busy dreaming our own dreams,” Joyce said. “I don’t remember a river.”

“I don’t either,” Lottie’s father said.

“However, it may have been your mother,” Death said. “Truly her, that is. When I was captured in the net, the balance of life and death was thrown even further askew. I did

not have the ability to maintain the borders between the two realms as I usually do. It is possible that your mother crossed over, into your dream, to help you.”

“Really?” Lottie said.

“We will walk and discuss it,” Death said.

“Yeah,” one of the Sentinels said, an older woman with her gray hair shaved into a buzzcut. “I may not have been conscious for most of the time I’ve been here, but I’m ready to leave now.”

The others chuckled and murmured agreement. “To the Bridge!” they called.

Almost as one, they all turned and began making their way through the mirror ponds toward the Bridge. Lottie reached out with her Sentinel abilities and realized that she could feel the Bridge from there and could tell in which direction it lay.

“Won’t it want another sacrifice?” Sylvester asked, voice pinched with worry.

The women around them laughed. “Sure it’ll want one,” the buzzcut Sentinel said. “And just let it try to take one with all these Sentinels around.”

Lottie smiled and felt tension run out of her shoulders. It was the first time, the very first time, that she had not been frightened of monsters one bit. There were not a great many Sentinels left—a quick count revealed less than one hundred—but they were more than a match for a bridge monster that she had intimidated all by herself. They were even a match, she realized, for the elder Nimetu between them and the Bridge.

She walked between her parents, one hand in each of theirs. And she smiled. A look over her shoulder showed that the glowing souls were following them like so many silent ducklings. On her left, Lottie’s father talked animatedly with a Sentinel with thick glasses, tweed skirt, and fly-away blonde hair. She looked like a teacher or a librarian, and based

on how easily and carefully she was explaining Sentinels and the Lineage, Lottie figured she really might be.

Joyce gave her right hand a squeeze. Lottie looked up at her.

“Will all of this make sense to me one day, do you think?” she asked, a rueful smile playing at the corners of her lips.

Lottie shrugged. “I don’t think it makes sense to me yet,” she replied honestly. “Not all of it anyway. But I bet it’ll make sense soon. Especially if Dad gets into research mode.”

Joyce chuckled. “I think that’s already happened.” She nodded toward Lottie’s father, who had drawn a second and third Sentinel into his discussion with the librarian Sentinel. Lottie chuckled too.

“It’s not really that complicated,” Sylvester said, once more being carried by Death like a backpack. “I mean, I’m not confused anyway.”

Joyce smiled at him. “Good to hear,” she said.

“Hey Lottie, do you think that was really your mom?” Sylvester asked, craning his neck to see her around Joyce’s belly.

Lottie shrugged. “It felt like her. I think.”

“It wasn’t really my brother,” Philomena said, behind her. Lottie looked over her shoulder. Philomena smiled weakly and continued, “My brother was the sweetest kid ever. That kid in my dream was kind of rotten, now that I think back on it. My brother would never have said some of the things he said to me—not if his life depended on it.”

“I am afraid I cannot be of definitive help either,” Death said, not sounding the least bit tired from carrying Sylvester. “I only know it could have been your mother. I cannot know if it really was.”

Lottie nodded and swallowed back her disappointment. Joyce squeezed her hand again and gave her an encouraging smile. Lottie smiled back—even if her mother had only been a dream, she'd been right that Joyce was a wonderful stepmother.

The mist parted for them as they walked. Sometimes Lottie smelled and even saw a Nimetu through the haze, but she wasn't afraid. They still moved with a terrible, threatening grace. Joyce was frightened when she saw one—Lottie could tell from the way her grip tightened. But Lottie wasn't afraid. Neither were the other Sentinels. They called out to the Nimetu: taunts or sarcastic farewells. The monsters never approached. They just disappeared, without even a hiss, back into the fog.

It felt like hardly any time before they reached the Bridge. It was like it had moved closer to them just to keep from getting on their bad side. Without hesitation, the Sentinels at the front of the line stepped onto the mouth of the Bridge and disappeared into thin air. Lottie told Joyce not to worry—that it was only going to look scary.

When she crossed onto the Bridge herself, she suppressed a gulp of worry, but it turned out she had told Joyce the truth. The Bridge was still narrow and dark, but the wind was gone. The monster that lived there was nowhere to be seen or felt. It was hiding from them somewhere deep in the shadows, waiting for them to pass, hoping, Lottie supposed, that they would all just keep walking.

Compared to the endless mist of the Mirror World, the darkness of the Bridge was almost like clarity. But when they reached the other side, and stepped out into the night—the real night, with a moon and stars overhead—she was shocked at how far she could see. Lottie looked up and up and up into the night sky. She felt like she could see forever.

They all walked calmly off the end of a small, wooden bridge over a stream far below. Lottie could hear the water more than she could see it. She and her parents followed the Sentinels ahead of them up a dirt path and out of the trees onto a wide, paved road. The stars weren't as clear here, because there were street lights, but the light helped her to see everyone's faces better.

"Where are we?" Philomena asked.

"Vermont," Death replied. "The Bridge has moved."

"*Vermont?*" Lottie's father cried. Then he laughed, nervously. "Oh, Lottie, Ms. Lottie. I'm so sorry I didn't believe you before about... about all of this."

Lottie smiled up at him. "It's okay," she said. "Even monkeys fall out of trees."

His eyebrows jumped with surprise, and then he grinned. "Your mother used to say that, you know. All the time."

Lottie nodded, grinning now too. It really had been her mother!

"I know," she said.

Her father looked around as the rest of the Sentinels came pouring out onto the road, laughing and talking, holding their magical bows in strong hands. Nearby, Death was coaxing the floating souls closer. Sylvester leaned against the Sentinel in the Hawaiian sarong, standing on one leg. Death opened a little blue door in the side of a nearby tree and waved all the souls through, smiling all the while. Lottie couldn't see through the door, but she was pretty sure it wasn't the usual stardust world that she was familiar with. Beyond the little blue door was the same place her mother was—or at least a way to get there. The glowing souls rushed through the door, almost gleeful, chanting their names happily as they went.

Lottie's father sighed. "I suppose now that you have all this—all this wonderful magic, that you won't have much time for science anymore, huh?"

"I'll have to make time for it," Lottie replied. "I'm going to be a scientist when I grow up."

He raised his eyebrows with surprise again, but she could see he was pleased.

"What about being a Sentinel?" he asked.

"I'm already a Sentinel," Lottie said. "I can be both."

The End