



# The UNICORN QUEST

*Secret in  
the Stone*

KAMILLA BENKO

BLOOMSBURY



The  
UNICORN  
QUEST *Secret in  
the Stone*



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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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## “WAR CHANT”

Axes chop  
And hammers swing,  
Soldiers stomp,  
But diamonds gleam.

Mothers weep  
And fathers worry,  
But only war  
Can bring me glory.

Emeralds shine  
And rubies mourn,  
But there's no mine  
For unicorn's horn.

Axes chop  
And hammers swing,  
My heart stops,  
But war cries ring.

*Gemmer Army Marching Chant*  
*Lyrics circa 990 Craft Era*  
*Composer unknown*



# CHAPTER 1

*Graveyard.*

That was the first word that came to Claire Martinson's mind as she took in the ruined city ahead of her.

The second and third words were: *Absolutely not.* There was no way this could be the city they'd been seeking—the Gemmer school where Claire would learn how to perfect her magic.

Where she was going to figure out how to bring unicorns back to Arden.

This was . . .

"A ghost town," Claire whispered.

"Are you sure it's Stonehaven?" Sophie asked, and Claire was glad to hear some apprehension in her older sister's voice. If Sophie, who at the age of thirteen had already explored a magical land by herself, defeated a mysterious illness, and



passed sixth grade, wasn't feeling great about their final destination, then maybe Claire wasn't such a coward after all.

"It looks so . . ."

"Creepy?" Claire offered.

Sophie tightened the ribbon on her ponytail. "Desolate," she finished.

Desolate, indeed. Stone houses stood abandoned, their windows as empty as the sockets of a skull. Weeds grew in the cracks of cobblestone roads, and a fine layer of white dust coated everything. Claire half expected a ghost to jump out at them, and after everything that had happened, she wouldn't have been surprised.

Well, maybe she would have been a little surprised, but in the last couple of weeks, Claire had gotten used to unusual things. Like the fact that other worlds existed, that art could be magic, and that unicorns were real.

"Hold a moment, Princesses!" Claire jumped as Anvil Malchain, their guide and traveling companion, turned the corner to join them.

Another unusual thing Claire now knew: she was a princess.

Only a few weeks ago, Claire and Sophie hadn't been princesses at all—just sisters, who had a mom and a dad, and a summer that they would be spending in their late great-aunt Diana's mansion, organizing all her mysterious artifacts for an estate sale in the fall. But then they had discovered a ladder in a fireplace, and everything had changed.



Because at the end of the ladder it had not been Windemere Manor's roof, but an old stone well that opened into another world: Arden, a land of monsters and magic. A land that had once been ruled by Claire and Sophie's ancestors. A land that now needed saving.

A land that needed unicorns.

Which was where the two new princesses of Arden came into it: they had brought the magical moonstone necklace from their world to Arden. Only they weren't moonstones at all, but *moontears*—and they were supposed to usher in a new age of unicorns. The only thing was, neither of them knew how to wake the moontears.

And that was why they had been climbing Starscape Mountain: so they could get to Stonehaven, a settlement of Gemmers who might be able to show them how. The Gemmer Guild, after all, understood the nature of rock and minerals, and was able to harness the magic and power within them.

But Stonehaven was supposed to be a place with answers, not this empty town. A cold wind brushed against Claire's neck, and a low moan rose around them as the wind played through the abandoned buildings.

"Where is everyone?" Claire asked Anvil as he caught up with them. One of the most talented Forgers of Arden, Anvil was famed and feared for his talent with metal and his double-headed ax. But as Claire had gotten to know him, she'd realized he wasn't like an ax at all. Instead, he was more like a wrought iron gate: straight-backed, a bit foreboding, but also



protective. He'd been following behind them, covering their tracks so that no one could tell they had passed.

"In Starscape Citadel, I expect," Anvil said, pointing toward the mountain's peak.

Shielding her eyes, Claire squinted against the sun. The small houses continued to march up the mountainside, spiraling around to the summit's flourish: the gleaming domed roof of a marble castle.

Amid all the other rubble, the castle looked . . . enchanting. *Magical*. Which, she supposed, made sense.

"Now that's more like it," Sophie said, sounding pleased. "A palace! An Experience!" She looked over at Claire. "Maybe they'll help me find my magic, like you."

Claire's chest pinged as it always did when Sophie pointed out this difference between them. It wasn't her fault, but she couldn't help but feel a little guilty. Most everyone in Arden had had the ability to shape the magic found in the natural world around them: members of the Tiller Guild worked with plants, while Forgers crafted metal, Spinners handled thread, and Gemmers carved stone.

Claire had discovered she was a Gemmer, having inherited her family's propensity for rock, when she liberated a legendary unicorn from stone. More specifically, from a monolith called Unicorn Rock.

But for some reason she could only guess at, Sophie didn't seem to have any magic of her own. Which was weird, because Claire had always thought of her sister as the magical one of



the two. Sophie was the brave one, the one who had sought out Experiences rather than hiding behind a sketch pad like Claire.

“And here,” Anvil said, “I’m afraid, I must leave you.”

Claire’s stomach swooped, even though she knew firsthand why he—a member of the Forger Guild—couldn’t trespass on land claimed by the Gemmer Guild. The guilds were deeply mistrustful of one another, and except for limited trading, interaction between the four guilds was forbidden by law.

“You can’t leave us,” Sophie protested. “Look at this place!”

Anvil reached under his chain mail shirt and pulled something out.

“Here,” he said, pressing a bronze circle into Sophie’s hand. Claire immediately recognized it as a Kompass. Not a compass, like back at home in the world of Windemere Manor, which always pointed north, but a Kompass, a rare magic known only to the Malchain family that always pointed toward the one person or thing it was forged to find. In this particular case, it was Aquila, Anvil’s cousin and the best treasure hunter in all of Arden.

“Once you’ve woken the moontears, follow the Kompass to us,” he said. “Most likely, we will be near the Sorrowful Plains. And remember what I told you.”

Sophie’s hand brushed against the small lump under her tunic’s neckline. “The unicorn?” she asked, and when Anvil nodded she quickly promised, “We won’t tell anyone.”

Throughout their weeklong journey, Anvil had made them



repeat that they would not tell anyone how the unicorn had burst from the stone in a blaze of light to heal Sophie from a nearly fatal arrow wound and her illness. But then he had vanished from the Sorrowful Plains, and now Aquila was tracking him, hoping to find the unicorn before someone else did.

Anvil had told them it was the last unicorn.

Unless they could use the moontear necklace to wake more.

Claire's heart squeezed as Sophie carefully put the Kompass in her cloak pocket. Unicorns had once roamed Arden's meadows, until they had been hunted to extinction three hundred years ago, during the great war, the Guild War between the four magics. Without unicorns, Arden's magic was slowly weakening: guild magic could no longer do the wonders of the past, and children were sometimes born without any magic at all.

But worst: ever since the disappearance of the unicorns, dark, shadowy creatures called wraiths had appeared, terrorizing the land. No one knew where the wraiths had come from, but everyone agreed they were a sign that without magic, without unicorns, their world was in great peril.

Magic was weakening. Arden was dying. Claire looked around at the abandoned streets and shivered.

But there was still hope . . . so long as she didn't mess anything up.

"Thank you, Anvil," Sophie said, giving the Forger a quick hug. "We'll see you soon."

Anvil's stern expression softened slightly. "I know you will."

Sophie moved forward through the eerily quiet streets, up



toward the Citadel that loomed above them like a beacon. But Claire hesitated. Her legs felt as sturdy as the moss fringing the abandoned houses. Even though they came here to speak to Gemmers, Claire wasn't entirely sure that she wanted to.

Hundreds of years ago, the Gemmers grew too powerful and conquered the other guilds. As a result, the others rose against them, and the bloody Guild War ensued. As the tension escalated, the people of Arden began to hunt unicorns, believing the rumor that whoever killed a unicorn would live forever. It wasn't true, of course, but it *was* true that any artifact made from a part of a unicorn made guild magic stronger.

The Gemmers—*Claire's* family—caused all that. Their ancestor, Queen Estelle, had led the unicorn hunt.

"Claire!" Sophie called, already far enough up the road that she needed to shout. "Are you coming?"

Anvil looked down at Claire, his dark eyes boring into hers a little too knowingly. "Gemmers are stubborn, but their word is always rock-solid once they have given it."

Claire grimaced. When she'd learned she was a princess, she had promised to help Arden. After all, this magical world had healed her sister from a disease the doctors at the hospital back at home did not even have a name for.

"Just be sure that you and Sophie take care of each other," Anvil continued, "and everything will be all right."

"Thank you." Claire quickly hugged the Forger, not even minding how cold his chain mail was. "Thank you for everything."

"Now then, go on," Anvil said gruffly, but Claire was sure



she caught him smiling before she ran to catch up with her sister.

Keeping her eyes on Sophie's bouncing ponytail, she wound her way up through the city. It was hard to believe that Stonehaven had ever been anything more than this abandoned place, but Anvil had told them that Stonehaven had once been their family's summer palace, the mountain breezes wafting between stone archways were always cool, while the lush blanket of forest on the lower slopes was good for falconry and other . . . sports.

Unicorn hunts.

Claire lifted her feet over another rock pile. There were many such piles littering the mountainside, and they had probably once been the base of a garden wall or bridge. Now, though, they just looked like forgotten tombstones.

The wind picked up, pulling curls from the tangled knot perched on her head. Strands of hair stuck to her sweaty forehead, making her feel itchy all over. The road up to the Citadel was steep—so steep that it eventually became steps carved into the mountain itself. She paused a moment to catch her breath, and took in the view from this high up.

Starscape Mountain swept out beneath them, a tapestry of towering pines, softly filtered sunlight, and rushing waterfalls that tumbled from its many ridges. At its base, she imagined she could just make out the edge of the Sorrowful Plains, which from this safe height seemed to be nothing more than a pocketful of shadows.

And beyond that, the rest of Arden unfurled. Though she could not see them, Claire knew that tucked somewhere into



this land was a Tiller village with a cage of metal vines and a Forger city filled with ringing metal. Somewhere down there were narrowboats carrying merchants of magical objects and even more magical stories, and underground caverns where wyverns sailed through sapphire-studded tunnels.

And among all those wonders sat an old stone well . . . and a way back home.

“HEY!” Sophie’s sudden cry echoed down the mountainside.

“Sophie!” Claire looked up the steps, but her sister had already reached the top. So much for following Anvil’s advice. Pumping her legs, Claire took the crumbling steps two at a time until she reached the flat summit—and gasped.

The road wound forward a few feet more, then ended abruptly at the base of a cliff face. No, not a cliff—a *wall*, one that rose hundreds of feet into the air.

“Can you believe this? There’s no door,” Sophie grumbled to Claire. And there wasn’t—not even a window. In fact, there were no lines at all in the smooth surface. The wall seemed to have been carved from a single piece of stone and was as seamless as an eggshell.

“HEY!” Sophie shouted again, cupping her hands around her mouth. “LET US IN!”

Trying to see whom, exactly, Sophie was yelling at, Claire followed her sister’s gaze up . . . and up . . . and up to a ledge high above them. On top of it, a group of people stared back down at them.

Except . . .



“Those aren’t people,” Claire said, voice awed. “They’re *statues*.”

There were about twenty of them, a mix of men and women in helmets or crowns, all in robes that fell in stone folds around their feet. Though they were too high up for Claire to see their expressions, she could clearly see the stone swords and maces they held in their hands.

“Maybe we should just try knocking,” Claire suggested, tearing her eyes away from the dizzying wall. She turned slowly to look at her sister. “I don’t know what else—Sophie, why do you have your dagger out?”

“Because,” Sophie said quietly, “I think that statue just moved.”



# CHAPTER

## 2

*What?*”

But Claire’s question was immediately answered as a stone knight flexed his fingers . . . and leaped off the ledge.

In the several long seconds it took the knight to hit the earth, Claire heard a high-pitched scream. It could have been Sophie, or Claire, or both—but it didn’t matter. Either way, the Stone Knight crunched down to the ground behind them, sending pebbles and dust high into the air as his knees bent to absorb the impact.

“Stay away!” Sophie yelled, and Claire felt a pull at her tunic as her sister yanked her back. A second later, Claire felt the solid presence of the wall against her shoulders.

The Stone Knight had trapped them.

Slowly, the knight unfolded from his crouched position,



and rose to his towering height. His feet were as large as trash cans and each leg was as thick as a telephone pole. He strode toward them, shooting tiny tremors through the earth.

Suddenly, Sophie was in front of Claire, holding out the “just in case” dagger Aquila had loaned them. Her feet were spread shoulder width apart, front foot pointing straight out, back foot pointing sideways. It was the position Claire recognized from a few training sessions with Anvil: *En garde*. The attack position.

“What are you doing?” Claire yelled. The dagger was just a toothpick compared to the stomping feet.

“Do something!” Sophie shouted back, not tearing her eyes away from the stone giant. “Come on, Claire. Use your magic!”

“I—I don’t know how!” Claire said, struggling to breathe. She thought she might faint.

“*You’re a Gemmer!*” Sophie yelled. “*There are rocks everywhere!*”

Flustered, Claire scooped up a handful of pebbles and dirt. Only once before had she done magic on purpose, and then she’d had the help of the Unicorn Harp to strengthen her power. There was no unicorn artifact to help her now. There was no magical hum. The only thing she felt in her bones was *fear*.

“If you’re not going to do anything, run!” Sophie yelled as she brandished her dagger. “Get away!”

Sophie’s command anchored Claire; she wasn’t going to leave her sister alone again. Not today, not ever.



Winding her arm back, Claire aimed, threw—  
—the pebbles clattered down harmlessly, woefully short.  
The Stone Knight was upon them.

Claire saw Sophie swing the dagger at the stone leg, sparks flying as the blade scraped rock. The knight paused, as though confused about the tiny thing near its feet making such a big fuss. He gave the nuisance a kick, and the dagger spun through the air as Sophie fell on her side.

With a rumble that sounded like slow-moving thunder, the knight pulled his sword from his scabbard.

“Run!” Sophie yelled again as she scrambled away from the stone foot on all fours. The moontear necklace had slipped out from under her tunic and swung about wildly, throwing light into the air.

The Stone Knight raised his sword into the sky.

“No,” Claire yelled. “Sophie—!”

And then the Stone Knight paused.

Claire tensed, waiting for the blow . . . but it never came.

Instead, there was another puff of dust as the Stone Knight let his sword tumble to the ground. And then, the knight sank into a low bow—and stayed there.

A deafening silence fell over the odd scene, punctuated only by Claire’s quick breaths. Was it a trick? But the knight stayed still.

Sophie looked impressed. “How did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Claire said, cautiously looking around. She felt like someone had told her a joke, and she was



still waiting for the punch line. But as she took a step forward, a giant *crack* snapped the air.

Whipping around, she saw something was happening to the wall. Thin, tiny lines had appeared across its once smooth face. They raced across the wall's surface, converging and meeting to form the outline of an archway.

A second *crack* filled the air, followed by an explosion of grit and gravel.

"Duck!" Sophie cried. Claire threw her hands over her head as pebbles and dust engulfed them.

Slowly, the air cleared.

A giant stone door stood in the center of the wall, a familiar design of animals and flowers carved into it.

"I guess that's how you get into Stonehaven," Sophie said, blinking rapidly as dust fell into her eyes. Claire didn't say anything; she could only stare. As she watched, the enormous door slowly swung open . . .

. . . and an army flooded out.

"Hide the necklace," Claire whispered, and Sophie shoved the moontears back under her tunic just as soldiers encircled them. Each Gemmer gripped a long spear tipped by a wickedly sharp black rock. Claire had the horrible feeling that if she so much as sneezed, she'd be pinned down as easily as a paper note to a corkboard.

The tallest guard, a man with arms and legs as spindly as a spider but shoulders as wide as a barrel, jabbed his spear in their direction. "Forgers aren't allowed on Starscrape Mountain," he said angrily. "You have violated the treaty!"



Claire exchanged a panicked glance with Sophie. Forgers—the Gemmers thought they were Forgers! The leather clothes that Aquila and Anvil had given them were great for traveling and cleaner than the outfit Claire had arrived in, but they'd forgotten that they looked Forger-made.

"We're not," Claire squeaked out. But the guard didn't seem to hear her, or care what she said, because he spoke loudly over her, "As you are violators of the Guild Treaty, we have the right to punish you under Gemmer law. You can come willingly . . . or not. Your choice."

"We'll come willingly," Claire yelled. "Won't we, Sophie?"

"Er, yes, very willingly!" Sophie said, her spattering of freckles standing out more than usual.

The tall guard looked slightly disappointed, yet he must have given an invisible signal, because all the spear tips suddenly swooped upward like a startled flock of sparrows. Claire took big, gulping breaths of air. She hadn't realized how little she'd breathed while the spears had been leveled at them.

"Wraith Watch," he barked out, "bind their hands."

"Commander Jasper," another guard said in a low voice, "is that really necessary? They're just children."

"In the light of recent events, any Forger is a threat, no matter how puny they may appear," Commander Jasper said flatly.

Unease prickled across Claire's shoulders.

"What events?" Sophie said, asking Claire's own question.

Jasper's expression remained emotionless. "The events regarding the Sorrowful Plains."



Claire sucked in her breath and beside her, she felt Sophie stiffen.

“Yes,” Sophie said, her voice carefully measured, “Unicorn Rock is no longer there . . .”

“Not just Unicorn Rock,” Jasper said. “Queen Rock, too, is gone.”

Claire’s heart zigzagged in her chest. She felt as if someone had just taken her freshly painted masterpiece, still gleaming with wet paint, and dragged their fingers across it.

“Gone?” she burst out. “Gone *where*?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Jasper said, as he signaled to the Wraith Watch to begin tying their hands. “It’s not like Unicorn Rock or Queen Rock could have just walked off on their own, now, could they?”

A soft squeak escaped Claire, and Sophie frowned at her. *Keep it together, Clairina*, her expression read. But Sophie didn’t understand. Only one person in all of Arden could have woken Queen Estelle: Claire, a royal Gemmer princess who shared the same exact Gemmer blood as Prince Martin. And she would never want to wake the queen. But one group did . . .

Before Claire could stop herself, she heard herself asking, “Is it the Royalists?”

“Diamonds above, no!” Jasper barked out a laugh. “The Royalists and their foolish beliefs! No—this is most likely the work of some Forgers. Only those metal-skulled smiths would have the audacity to obliterate our guild’s greatest monuments.”



“Don’t worry.” Sophie’s breath tickled Claire’s ear as she leaned in close. All the while, the Wraith Watch stepped closer. “Only *you* could have woken her. There’s no way Queen Estelle is back.”

“But if it’s true . . .” Claire trailed off. Maybe Sophie wasn’t worried, but Sophie hadn’t been the one who’d traveled through the Petrified Forest and heard the echoes of the long-past unicorn hunt. She hadn’t been the one to hear the queen’s ice-cold voice commanding her armies to kill them all. And now they were willingly entering an entire palace of people whose ancestors had fought for the same queen long ago.

But Claire had no more time to think about it, as Commander Jasper and the Wraith Watch escorted them through the door and into Starscape Citadel.

“Who are these girls?”

“Did the knight *actually* bow to them?”

“Commander Jasper, what’s going on?”

A riot of sound surged around Claire as questions flew from the richly dressed crowd that pressed in around them. Everyone, men and women alike, was bedecked in gemstones. They wore great rings, long necklaces, brooches, and earrings. All together, the Gemmers glittered like a night sky.

“What do the Forgerlings want?”

“Where did they—”

“—DIAMONDS ABOVE!” a voice thundered over the rest. “For all that’s strong and stable, return to your evening duties!”



The Gemmers shifted and the crowd parted. Claire could see an old man coming toward them. He hunched over a cane, and the hand that gripped it flashed in the chandelier's light. As he lurched closer, Claire saw why. His fingers were covered in rings. Big ones, small ones, ones set with river stones and others with diamonds that she was pretty sure Mom would have loved.

But as pretty as they were, the sight was unsettling. Claire had been in Arden long enough to know that the most powerful magic could be done with a single thread, the tiniest drop of potion . . . or the smallest pebbled ring.

"Go on, then," the man said, coming to stand in front of them and waving his hands at the Wraith Watch still surrounding Jasper. "Off with you, too. Commander Jasper is plenty of protection from children."

The guards cast their heads down sheepishly and slowly drifted away with the rest of the crowd, while the old man turned to Jasper. "Terra is waiting for us in her study."

The commander shifted his spear. "Grandmaster Carnelian, wouldn't the dungeon be better?"

Carnelian shook his head. "The Stone Knight bowed to them, Jasper. And that changes everything."



# CHAPTER

## 3

Carnelian set off through the Citadel at a fast clip, and with Jasper's spear still pointing at their back, the girls followed. Claire was vaguely aware of beautiful stained-glass windows and vaulted ceilings made to look like stone lace, but it was hard to take in anything when so many Gemmers stared as they rushed by. *Why* had Anvil and Aquila thought this was a good idea? The last time she'd conversed with a grandmaster, Claire had ended up in a cage.

But as Carnelian opened the lone door at the top of a winding staircase, colored light filled Claire's view. She gasped as Sophie murmured, "Spectacular!"

A chandelier threaded with different colored gems hung in the center of a high tower ceiling. Though Claire couldn't see any candles or light bulbs, the stones glowed with their own



internal light, throwing splashes of emerald green, ruby red, sapphire blue, and amethyst purple throughout the round, cozy study.

And everywhere, there were unicorns.

In frames as charcoal sketches. On shelves as bookends, propping up tomes with titles like *The Unicorn Chronicles* and *The Hair of a Hare and Horn of a Unicorn*. On the floor, a thickly woven rug depicted a unicorn held captive in a garden.

It was as different from the graveyard village below as it could possibly be.

“These are the intruders the Stone Knight bowed down to?” A woman with a heart-shaped face and a cascade of black curls stood from behind a desk and strode toward them. Her emerald gown swished softly, the actual emeralds sewn onto her sleeves iridescent in the light. But what drew Claire to the woman were her eyes.

Framed by a pair of copper spectacles with the thickest lenses Claire had ever seen, her jet black eyes appeared three times the normal size. From the sides of the frames winged out even more lenses that looked as though they could be swapped in to replace the current ones. With her amplified eyes and shimmery dress, Claire thought the woman resembled a beautiful dragonfly.

She flicked a lens. “I thought you would be . . .” She eyed the girls. “Bigger.” She gestured toward Carnelian. “Please have a seat, Grandmaster.”

“Thank you, Scholar Terra,” Carnelian said as she offered



him an armchair. Terra took a seat behind her desk, while Jasper stayed standing, his spear conspicuously by his side.

No chair was offered to Claire and Sophie, so Claire stood as close as she could to her sister.

“Let’s get to the bottom of this,” Terra said as she pulled out a slate and chalk from her desk. “What are your names?”

“I am Sophie Andrea, and this is my sister,” Sophie said, gesturing to Claire, “Claire Elaina Martinson—er, d’Astora.”

That was right, Claire thought, and tried to stand a little taller. They *were* d’Astoras, as their great-grandfather Martin Martinson, formerly Prince Martin d’Astora of Arden, had changed his name when he stole away to another world.

For a moment, all was still as Terra stared hard at the girls.

Then Jasper let out a hoarse yell. Half a heartbeat later, the tip of his spear was pointed right at Sophie’s chest. “Lies!”

The man’s eyes were so pale that they were the color of ice, though they seemed to burn as they stayed on Sophie. “The audacity of these lowlanders to claim a relationship to the d’Astora family! Grandmaster, I say we take them outside for the wraiths!”

A shriek froze in Claire’s throat. *Wraiths*—even hearing their names out loud filled her with a bone-numbing fear, with a feeling of being choked by shadows.

“Grandmaster,” Terra said, “if I may be so bold, perhaps that is why the knight bowed. He recognized d’Astora blood.”

Carnelian stared at Claire and Sophie for what seemed an eternity, twisting one of his many rings thoughtfully. Finally,



he shook his head. "Your request is denied, Commander Jasper. For now. You—Claire, is it? Do you have any evidence to support what you say?"

Claire tried to say the word bravely, but it came out barely more than a whisper. "Yes."

"*But*," Sophie added, "we can only show you if you promise to stop pointing that thing at me and my sister," she nodded at Jasper's spear, "and untie our hands."

Terra gave a start. "You tied their hands? Really, Jasper! They're children!" Standing up, she bustled around the desk and with a unicorn-shaped letter opener cut their ties, while Jasper, grumbling, leaned his weapon against the marble wall.

Grandmaster Carnelian drummed his fingers against the armchair, his rings rattling. "Now, your evidence, please."

Claire held her breath as she watched Sophie tug the silver chain that had been hidden under her neckline. Four luminous moontears dangled from it, shimmering, a quiet beauty unaware of the desperation surrounding them.

Claire's heart beat faster, as it always did when she saw them.

The Great Unicorn Treasure.

The unicorns' final chance.

Arden's last hope.

"By all the diamonds above," Grandmaster Carnelian said softly.

Reluctantly, Claire dragged her eyes away from the necklace to look at the Gemmer grandmaster. His eyes were



overbright, like sunlight's reflection on water. He smiled faintly, and the deepest lines on his brow smoothed. It was as if merely seeing the moontears had made him younger.

Carefully, Sophie unlatched the necklace's clasp and laid it on the scholar's desk.

"Are those . . .," Terra said, her voice oddly choked. She leaned forward and flipped through her lenses. Suddenly, she stopped fiddling with the glasses and let out a soft "oh." She looked up, and Claire was startled to see that the woman's face was streaked with tears. "I never thought I'd live to see the day. *Moontears*. May I?"

Claire and Sophie nodded, and Terra gently placed a slender finger on the necklace.

"Oh," she breathed again, delighted. "They're warm!"

Sophie smiled. "I thought the same thing, but I told myself it was just all the hiking we'd been doing."

Commander Jasper looked like a man at war with himself. Though he placed his hands behind his back, he leaned forward eagerly. He opened his mouth several times, before seeming to finally settle on, "*How?*"

"My great-aunt gave them to me," Sophie said, and Claire nodded, even though technically, Great-Aunt Diana hadn't given them to her. Sophie had found the necklace among all the strange treasures of Windemere Manor. Though now that Claire knew a little more about Arden, perhaps the *moontears* had found *Sophie*.

As Sophie told their story, careful to avoid certain aspects,



like that she'd been accused of stealing the Unicorn Harp from Greenwood Village or that Claire had somehow released the unicorn from Unicorn Rock or that they came from another world, Claire silently filled in the actual details. The *full* story, from the very beginning.

Three hundred Arden years ago, Prince Martin d'Astora, younger brother to the evil Queen Estelle of Arden—on whose orders all but one unicorn had been slaughtered—had forged the fireplace-chimney-well as a way to escape out of Arden during the terrible war . . . and into a house in the countryside—in another world. This house had been passed down from generation to generation until Diana. As in, Claire and Sophie's recently deceased great-aunt Diana.

"And so, we journeyed to Stonehaven to ask for your help," Sophie finally finished.

"Can you see a way to open the moontears?" Carnelian asked Terra curiously. Claire held her breath. Finally, they would know! Finally, unicorns would return.

Terra knit her brow and stared pensively at the necklace. "I'm not sure," she murmured, flipping through the lenses again. "I've never come across anything, in all my studies, that says how to wake a moontear. In fact, there is no written record of anyone ever actually finding one, let alone studying it."

Stars, which spent their entire lives emitting light across the universes, would at the end, collapse in on themselves. Claire's great hope had stretched her, tugged her forward, and now, with a simple sentence, it was gone. And without it, Claire felt her great mission fall away, and herself collapsing alongside it.



“But you’re Gemmers,” Claire said, feeling light-headed and empty. “You’re *supposed* to know about rock stuff.”

Terra frowned. “*Rock stuff*, as you so elegantly put it, is only one part. Moontears were merely myth, ‘fallen from the moon and witnessed by starlight’ as Gemmer Historian Eliza the Astute once wrote. These gems are unlike any other—they are unicorn-touched.”

The scholar settled back in her chair. “But the d’Astora family rose to the Gemmer throne because they always shared a special bond with unicorns. If anyone can discover the moon-tears’ secrets, it would be a Gemmer princess. So perhaps it is the girls, and not us, who must open them.”

“Diamonds above,” Jasper said so loudly that Claire jumped. He had come around from the desk and now stood next to them. “They’re not princesses! They’re clearly imposters. The grandmaster *knows* that they’re probably the ones behind the destruction of Unicorn and Queen Rocks!”

“Don’t presume to know what’s in my mind,” Grandmaster Carnelian said, narrowing his eyes, “because you don’t. If you *did* know what I thought, you’d realize I want you to be quiet . . . so I can think.”

Jasper’s mouth snapped shut, and Carnelian looked at Terra. “What are you saying?”

Pursing her lips, Terra tapped the sides of her elaborate spectacles. Looking once more between the moontears and the girls, she finally said, “As shocking as it sounds, it is possible these girls are telling the truth and they really are princesses. They brought the moontears here, after all. And with



the wraith attacks growing more frequent, we could use the power of unicorns more than ever.”

“This is true.” Carnelian nodded in agreement. “But they clearly have no idea how to access the magic of the moontears, either.” He glanced at the girls. “I’m not even sure they have basic Gemmer skills.”

Claire felt her face get hot, like when you open a toaster oven. “I’ve only known I’m a Gemmer for two weeks now and Sophie—”

“I’m the same,” Sophie cut in. “I’ve only known that I’m a Gemmer for two weeks, too.” Claire didn’t look at Sophie, but the room felt even warmer at her sister’s lie. So far, anyway, Sophie hadn’t demonstrated any magic ability whatsoever.

Silence filled the space around them as the grandmaster and scholar stared intently at each other. Finally, after what seemed like a century, Terra spoke. “We could teach them. If they are truly of the d’Astora bloodline, they might help us find a way to wake the moontears. What do we risk by training them?”

“We risk,” Jasper interrupted, “allowing lowland spies onto our mountain!”

“You risk,” Sophie said quietly, “a possibility of unicorns.”

*A possibility of unicorns.* The phrase seemed to hang in the air.

Claire held her breath while Carnelian tapped his fingers along the head of his bejeweled cane. Unlike most canes, this



one had a stone handle on it in the shape of a ram's head. Its curling horns were chiseled to a point just as sharp as Jasper's spear.

The grandmaster let out a long sigh. "So be it," Carnelian said. "Scholar Terra, you will begin the girls'—the princesses'—training in the morning. But," he added, turning to face them, "if anything happens to disprove your tale . . . we will go with Commander Jasper's original suggestion. Do you understand?"

*Take them outside for the wraiths.*

Claire nodded. Yes, she definitely understood. Sophie nodded, too.

Terra stood and looked at Claire. Behind her spectacles, her eyes were now magnified five-fold. Claire felt a thrill of fear as the woman ordered: "Follow me."

And so they did, stepping back into the strange and glittering halls of the Gemmers' Citadel, Claire bracing herself for whatever might await them at Stonehaven.



# CHAPTER

## 4

Sunlight streaked in through the diamond-paned windows of Claire and Sophie's tower bedroom. Or prison, as Sophie insisted on calling it.

Still, it really was a nice prison. The arched ceiling above the two small beds was painted a deep blue and inset with real diamonds that swirled together into some of Arden's most famous constellations. Their beds, though small, were comfortable, and the wardrobe was filled with plenty of apprentice uniforms that only had a few patches on them. There was even a window seat that gave Claire a sweeping view that she longed to draw.

But even drawing wouldn't be able to distract her from the tangle of knots in her stomach. After all, it was technically her first day of school . . . *Gemmer* school.



And at the end of the day, Terra said that they would run through their first test. But Claire didn't know what, exactly, the test would be.

"Stop biting your nails!" Sophie ordered. Claire hastily removed her fingers. She hadn't bitten them since she was a kid, but without her pencil to nibble, the old habit had returned. Turning around, she saw Sophie was still sitting cross-legged on the bed, the contents of a Gemmer pack spilled onto the quilt in front of her: a magnifying glass, tweezers, a small hammer, several chisels, and a glass vial of diamond dust—among several other instruments that Claire guessed would help her release magic from stone. That would, maybe, help her release the unicorns from the moontears.

"Do you think Terra forgot us?" Claire asked. When the scholar had deposited them last night, she'd informed them that they would remain in this room until she came to collect them tomorrow at second chime, shortly after dawn.

But the chimes had already sounded three times, and the sun was now fully up.

"Okay, that's it," Sophie said, and rolled off the bed. "We're not going to be some princesses waiting in a tower. We came to Stonehaven to learn. We came to wake the moontears." She swept the Gemmer tools back into the rucksack, and strode to the door. "Coming?"

Jasper's scowl and the glint of spear tips pierced through Claire's memory. "But Terra said—"

"Suit yourself." Sophie turned the knob and the door swung



open easily. Relief flitted through Claire. Last night, she thought she'd heard the click of the lock as Terra shut the door. Maybe they *were* actually guests, and not prisoners after all. But her relief vanished along with Sophie.

Even in another world, Sophie was always Sophie—always off on another Experience. Grabbing her own rucksack of Gemmer tools from a hook on the wall, Claire ran after her.

The Citadel's splendor blossomed around her as she hurried to keep up with her sister. Mosaics of bright stone seemed to gallop across the floors, and colored glass filled many of the windows, splashing color on the walls.

Stonehaven was more than beautiful—it was dazzling. A shot of excitement pulsed through Claire, chasing out her fear. She was going to learn how to make these beautiful things. She was going to learn *magic*.

"Hey!" a voice shouted from behind them.

"Slug soot," Sophie muttered, coming to such an abrupt stop that Claire crashed into her.

Both girls turned around.

A boy also in an apprentice uniform ran toward them. He had the most freckles Claire had ever seen. In fact, with his pointy nose and chin, he seemed to be made up entirely of freckles and angles.

"Are you Sophia and Claire?" the boy asked, panting slightly as he reached them. "Sorry, I mean, Princess Sophia and Princess Claire?"

Claire's neck heated instantly. "Just Claire, actual—"



"Indeed, we are," Sophie cut in, and Claire rolled her eyes at the accent Sophie suddenly had. "And you are?"

"Geode." The boy smiled, his freckles bunching up. "Terra says she's sorry she couldn't get you earlier. The west wing is about to fall off the mountain, and the grandmaster needed her help."

*Fall off the mountain.*

When they'd first seen the Citadel above the rubble and neglect of Stonehaven, she had wondered if it was somehow held together by magic, and here, she guessed, was her answer. But magic was slipping away from Arden, and if it disappeared entirely . . . would the rest of Stonehaven slip away with it?

Her nerves came clanging back down around her. So much rested on waking the moontears.

"Here," Geode said, seeming not to realize how extraordinary his statement was. "You missed breakfast, so I brought you some crescents." He produced two steaming pastries from his own Gemmer bag, and as Claire bit in, she realized it was stuffed with tangy cheese.

"You can eat on the way," Geode said as he resumed walking. "We're late for S.A.S."

"Late ferr what?" Sophie said, her regal act forgotten as she stuffed the rest of the crescent into her mouth.

"S.A.S.," Geode repeated, and picked up the pace, "stands for Slings, Arrows, and Spears. This way, please."

Claire almost choked on her final bit of crescent. Arrows were cool, of course they were, but she would have preferred if



her first lesson with magic started off with something a little less . . . deadly.

“Arrows!” Sophie whooped. “What an Experience!”

As they hurried through Stonehaven, Claire noticed that many passageways had been blocked by signs: “Forbidden!” “Danger!” and “Hallway-In.”

“Hallway-in?” Claire asked, panting slightly. “What’s that?”

“Like a cave-in, but a hall,” Geode explained.

“And that? What’s that mean?” Sophie asked, pointing to a sign that simply read, “Goats!”

“That’s where the goats sleep,” Geode said, and at their puzzled expressions, he explained, “With so few Gemmers, it’s hard to keep up the village. Years ago, Grandmaster Carnelian decided everyone—animals included—would move into the Citadel to try to preserve it. Everything else, we just had to let go.”

*Had to let go.*

That explained the neglected tombstone houses outside the wall of the Citadel. For a moment, Claire was filled with sadness for the Gemmers. She could only imagine what Stonehaven must have been like when magic flourished and the unicorns still lived. When it was a whole thriving city instead of just one palace above a pile of ruins.

“There’s just not enough of us anymore,” Geode continued as he turned down another chandelier-lit corridor. “If magic were stronger, or if the lower guilds would lend us a unicorn artifact, maybe things would be different, but for now, the goats



are kept in what once would have been the king's chambers. In here!"

They had followed him into a small room lined with weapons. Slingshots dangled from hooks in the wall, while flint spears stuck out of barrels like strange bouquets. Hammer-heads chiseled from rock lay across a table, along with a series of walking sticks that each had a large marble orb attached to the top. And in the corner, a cannon carved in the shape of a gargoyle loomed from the shadows.

Unease wriggled through Claire. The Gemmers, for how few they were, were very well armed. She wondered how old some of the stone weapons were. She wondered if any of them had been used in a unicorn hunt. And she wondered how learning to shoot an arrow would help wake the moontears.

"Take these," Geode said, holding out two bows toward them. Sophie snatched the bigger one, while Claire took the smaller. She didn't know a thing about bows, but it was pretty, made of a dark polished wood with soft leather straps wrapped around the grip. It was heavier than the only other bow she'd ever held, the one Mom had made for her from a bent coat hanger and yarn when she was a Merry Man in the fourth graders' production of *Robin Hood*.

"Usually, you only shoot the arrowheads you carve yourself," Geode said as he handed them each a quiver full of arrows. "But since we've missed that part of class, you can borrow these."

"Thank you," Claire said, and she meant it, even though



the arrows in her hand looked as sharp as crocodile teeth. It was nice that he was so helpful. When she'd accidentally joined the Forger academy for class, they hadn't been nearly so welcoming.

"So what's your plan?" Claire whispered to Sophie as they followed Geode to the back door.

Sophie's eyebrows shot up in an umbrella of surprise. "Whatever do you mean?"

Claire rolled her eyes. That wasn't going to work—not on her. "We don't even know if you're a Gemmer. How are you going to get through magic class?"

"Maybe I'm just not a Gemmer *yet*," Sophie said with a shrug. "Maybe I just need training to jog it loose, or something."

Claire frowned. Anvil Malchain had seemed pretty certain that Sophie was not a Gemmer, but Sophie clearly hadn't given up hope. An old worry yawned within Claire, stirring awake at Sophie's words. Did Sophie want to be a Gemmer so badly because she didn't think Claire could handle the pressure of waking the moontears on her own?

And was she right?

But there was no more time to think about it, because they had entered the training courtyard. A handful of children in the same garb as Claire and Sophie stood in an archer's stance, facing a line of targets on the far end of the pebble-filled courtyard.

"Elbow higher, Zuli!" the instructor barked, and Claire



gripped her bow harder. Her first instructor in magic was going to be none other than the glowering Commander Jasper.

“Lapis, stop squinting,” Jasper said to the next apprentice. “How can you expect to see a wraith with your eyes practically closed?”

“Commander!” Geode called. “We’re here.”

Jasper turned, and his already stormy expression darkened further as Claire and Sophie stepped forward.

“What are the *princesses* doing here?” Jasper said, and by the tone of his voice, Claire knew he thought they were just as royal as bird droppings. “They’re supposed to be with Terra—”

“Scholar Terra is working on the west wing,” Geode quickly explained.

“And she told them to come here first?”

When Claire and Sophie nodded, the furrows of Jasper’s brow were so deep that they looked like fault lines. “Join the others, then. AND WHO SAID YOU COULD STOP TO RELAX?”

Claire jumped. She hadn’t realized how silent the courtyard had become at their arrival, but at Jasper’s bellow, the apprentices tore their eyes away from them and quickly drew back their bowstrings.

Sophie and Claire slipped into line next to a boy and girl who shared the same corkscrew curls, pointed chin, and dimpled cheeks, so Claire knew they must be brother and sister, if not twins. Stealing a glance at the other apprentices, Claire tried to mimic the easy way they gripped the string and pulled



back. But her pretty wooden bow was stiff, and didn't seem to want to bend.

It looked so easy in the movies! But Claire could barely get it back one inch. Sophie, meanwhile, had pulled hers taut with ease, and looked as smug as their friend Nettle Green in a trivia contest.

"Pull harder," Sophie urged. "*Come on*, Claire."

Claire gritted her teeth and wondered how the bow could possibly be magic when it seemed to be only clunky and awkward in her hands. The bow budged an inch. She could feel sweat beading on her forehead as she tried to hold her position. Chills broke over her as a cool mountain breeze played between the apprentices. After a few more minutes of stance correcting, Jasper called on Geode to release the first arrow of the morning.

*Thwack!*

Cheers filled the courtyard as the arrow hit the target, but Claire suddenly felt sick. She glanced at Sophie to see her sister, too, looked ill, and was rubbing a spot under her collarbone, directly above her heart. The same place where an arrow had pierced her only a few weeks ago. The same place where a unicorn's horn had left a pink star-shaped scar.

"Pay attention, Princess!"

Claire tore her eyes away from Sophie only to realize that Jasper was standing beside her. All around, the apprentices snickered.

"I'm s-sorry," Claire stuttered. "What did you say?"



Jasper scowled. "Well then, it seems like you think you know everything already if you're not bothering to pay attention. Go ahead, notch your bow."

Claire's mouth went dry. "But I don't kn—"

*"Now."*



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