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WITH GINA DETWILER

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*For Jackson
Our firstborn son.
Our Prince Warrior.*

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PART ONE



Welcome to the Real World



CHAPTER ONE

Jumping In

There was something strange about that pond. Evan knew it from the first time he looked into its murky depths. What was down there? A monster? Like that one in Scotland, what was it called—Lock Ness? Something weird like that. He stood still, shivering a little, waiting for whatever it was to break through the surface and eat him. Alive. One gulp. He hoped it would be one gulp. He couldn't stand the thought of being chewed.

He was small enough for one gulp anyway. Not like his big brother, Xavier. Big, tough Xavier. With the cool name. Xavier even had muscles and armpit hair. Evan looked down at his own skinny, hairless arms. Not a muscle to be seen. No matter how many pull-ups he

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did from the tree branch of the big old oak in the backyard, they just refused to grow.

“Going in today?”

Evan turned and saw his brother standing on top of the old tire that hung from one of the oak tree’s thick branches. The tire had come with the tree, which had come with the house.

“Gonna do it today?” Xavier’s face was all know-it-all-ish, as usual, the corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

Ever since they moved to this house from the city two months ago, Evan had stood on this little dock and stared at this pond, waiting for the day when he would get up the nerve to jump. Show Xavier he wasn’t afraid. He had vowed to do it before the end of the summer, before starting fourth grade at his new school. He was sure by then he would have jumped in a hundred times. Yet here he was, a week before school opened, and he still hadn’t done it even once.

And every single day, while Evan stood there shivering, Xavier would appear and rub it in.

“Want me to give you a push?” Xavier’s grin got even wider.

“Go away,” said Evan, teeth and fists clenched. He turned back to face the pond. *Jump! Jump!* But the encouraging voices in his head were drowned out by his brother’s louder jibes.

“Come on, it’s easy.” Xavier jumped off the tire and sauntered up onto the dock, next to Evan. He was four inches taller. Sometimes it felt to Evan like four feet. “Watch me.”

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Xavier took a running leap and cannonballed like an Olympic diver, letting out a big whoop. Evan took a step back to avoid the gigantic splash.

“Go away!” he shouted.

“Come on, chicken,” Xavier said, swimming to the dock and pulling himself up. “Just do it.” He reached out to grab Evan, who pushed him away angrily.

“Leave me alone!”

“Chicken!” Xavier laughed again. “Chicken! *Cluck cluck cluck!*” He made some awful chicken noises and did a goofy chicken dance. Evan hated that dance. Xavier looked ridiculous doing it, but it always had the effect he wanted—to make Evan angrier than ever. Evan turned, red-faced, slamming into his big brother so hard the two of them went tumbling off the side of the dock, into the slimy mud at the edge of the water. *One punch, Evan thought. Just let me land one punch, and I’ll be happy.* The voice in his head was louder this time.

“Boys!” their mom called from the porch. She’d been watching them, of course. Evan thought it actually might be true what she always said: that she had eyes in the back of her head. “What’s going on?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Xavier yelled back before Evan could find his voice. “I was trying to help him jump—”

“You’re lying!” Evan’s whole body shook with rage. He threw another punch, missing his brother by a foot.

“Evan! Come inside this house right now!” Mom’s voice was all shriek-y. Bad sign.

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Evan pushed away from Xavier and stood up. He was covered in mud. His face felt hot, like there was a fire creeping up the back of his neck. Xavier got up too, wiping mud off his shoulders, laughter still in his eyes.

“Evan!” Mom called. “March!”

“Chicken,” Xavier whispered. Evan stifled the urge to cry and stomped into the house.

Xavier watched his little brother walk away. He felt sort of bad. He knew Evan was scared of jumping into the pond. He could have helped him. But every time he tried, it just came out wrong. He thought teasing him would make him mad enough to do it. But it didn't work. Nothing he did ever worked. *I guess this is just the way it is between us*, he thought. *We'll be enemies forever.*

He used to love being Evan's big brother, taking care of him, making sure he didn't get into trouble. Once, when Evan was still a baby, Xavier picked him up out of the crib, holding him upside down by his legs, and carried him into the bedroom where his mom and dad were sleeping. *Look!* he said so proudly. *I got Van!* His mom sort of freaked out, he remembered. His dad laughed.

Lately, though, all they seemed to do was fight. Evan got mad at the littlest things. Xavier figured his little brother was just jealous since Xavier was bigger and better at pretty much everything. He *was* four years older, after all. So what if he had a phone? *And* got to

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stay up an hour later? *And* was always picked first for the basketball games at the Rec? That's just the way things were.

After a while Xavier went into the house, where his mother had just finished reading Evan the Riot Act. That's what she called it. *The Riot Act*. What was the Riot Act anyway? He'd have to look that up. He liked looking up stuff. Whenever he asked his dad a question, his dad would say, "Look it up," which Xavier used to think meant, "I have no idea." But as he got older, he realized his dad knew there were some things he just had to figure out for himself.

Evan was sent to his room until supper. Then early bedtime. No basketball at the Rec tonight. Xavier felt a little bit bad. He should have gone into the kitchen and told his mom what he did to provoke Evan. Instead, he went into his room and searched on his phone:

Riot Act.

A few entries popped up.

Established in 1714 by the British Government. An act for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies . . .

What's a tumult? Xavier looked it up. *Chaos*. So, the Riot Act was for punishing people who caused chaos. Okay, that made sense. Sort of. Did it work? Xavier scanned the rest of the entry. From what he saw, apparently not. He figured you just couldn't write a rule outlawing chaos and expect everyone to follow it.

"Xavier! Come set the table!" Mom called from the kitchen. Suppertime. Dad would be home soon.

Xavier stuffed the phone in his pocket and went down to the kitchen. He loved the phone—he'd only

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gotten it when they moved to this house from the city a couple of months ago. Xavier thought it might have been a bribe for having to leave his old neighborhood. But he was also told he had to share the phone with his little brother. Share a phone with a nine-year-old? Where did parents get these ideas? Some clueless parenting handbook?

“Set the table,” Mom said as soon as he set foot in the kitchen. She turned away from him to pull something from the oven.

“It’s Evan’s turn,” Xavier said.

“You boys are so good at remembering whose turn it is, aren’t you?” Her voice was sharper than usual. “Just do it, please. I don’t have time to argue.”

I don’t have time to argue. Another one of Mom’s favorite sayings. Who didn’t have time to argue? That just didn’t make sense. Xavier considered arguing to be one of the most important skills of life. He thought he might even be a lawyer when he grew up. Or a professional basketball player. He hadn’t quite decided.

He set the table. Dad came in with his briefcase, kissed Mom on the cheek, and put his hand on Xavier’s shoulder. “So, kiddo, how was your day?”

I got Evan in trouble, Xavier thought. But he said, “Pretty good.”

“Just pretty good?”

Xavier shrugged. “Played ball at the Rec. Mr. J. Ar says I’ve got *potential*.” That was the word Mr. J. Ar had used. *Potential*. Xavier liked it. “There’s another pickup game tonight. Can I go?”

“Don’t see why not. Where’s Evan?”

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“In his room,” Mom said, “having a cool-off period.” (Mom’s word for *time-out*.) “Fighting again.”

“It takes two to fight, doesn’t it?” said Dad, looking suspiciously at Xavier.

“I didn’t do anything!” Xavier said, shrugging in the most innocent way he could. “He’s just mad because he’s still afraid to jump in the pond. So he takes it out on me.”

“He’ll do it when he’s ready,” Mom said. “Did you pour the water into the glasses on the table yet?”

Xavier poured the ice-cold water and helped Mom put forks and stuff on the table. He was on his best behavior now. *I’m the good son.*

“All set for school starting next week?” Dad asked, stealing a green bean from a bowl on the counter.

“Sure, I guess,” said Xavier. He had tried to avoid thinking about school—a new school in a new town, a whole new group of kids—although he didn’t want his dad to think he was scared or anything. He wasn’t scared, exactly. He was already pretty popular at the Rec, after all. He was good at sports, which was the main thing. But he always wondered, in the back of his mind, if he was really good *enough*.

Xavier glanced up to see his dad peering at him curiously, as if he could read his thoughts. He gave him a lopsided grin. “Don’t worry, Dad. It’ll be cool.” His dad smiled back.

CHAPTER TWO

A for Ahoratos

Levi put the finishing touches on his drawing—he needed to get the details right. He should know it by heart by now. He’d seen it often enough in his dreams—the strange symbol shaped a little bit like a squiggly *N* or *X*, depending on how you looked at it. He woke up every morning with the image burned into his mind.

Ahoratos. The name whispered in his head over and over.

What was it? What did it mean? And why was it haunting him?

He sat on a bench against the wall of the Cedar Creek Recreational Center, facing the skateboard park, his board at his side. His friends were all out skating, practicing new tricks. Across the parking lot, other kids were gathering for a game of basketball. Levi glanced over and saw that new kid Xavier trotting out onto the court, hands in the air, laughing. Xavier had quickly become King of Basketball at the Rec. Or he seemed to think he was.

“Hey, Levi! Come show us something, man!” his friends called, beckoning him out onto the ramps.

“In a minute,” he called back. He yawned. He loved skateboarding, but he was too tired at the moment. The dreams were starting to get to him.

Ahoratos . . .

The word seemed to float like a feather in his mind, wafting this way and that, always near but just out of his reach.

“What’s up, Levi? Want to join in the pickup game?”

His dad’s voice snapped him back to reality. He looked up to see his father towering over him, arms folded across his chest: James Arthur, known to the other kids as Mr. J. Ar. He wore a whistle around his neck, which meant he was going to ref the basketball game.

“No thanks,” Levi said.

“What you got there?” His dad peered down at the sketchbook. Levi tilted it to his chest so his dad couldn’t see. Levi still wasn’t sure he wanted anyone to know he liked to draw. It didn’t seem cool. Besides, his dad would want to know what that weird symbol was and why he was drawing it, and Levi didn’t really have an answer for him anyway.

“Uh—nothing.” He could feel his father’s eyes boring little holes in the top of his head.

“Maybe next time then, okay?”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

Levi watched him trot across the parking lot to the basketball court. That’s what his dad did now: trot. He said college football had worn his knees down too much for real running. A crowd of kids followed him, as usual. All the kids loved Levi’s dad. He spent many evenings at the Rec, even after a long day’s work, volunteering his time so the kids would have a fun place to hang out. Good thing, too, because without him there, the place would be utter chaos. The only staff person

was a part-time college student who spent most of her time in the office, studying for some summer course she was taking, drinking chai lattes from Starbucks, and texting her college friends. A squad of ninjas could rappel through the roof and she wouldn't know a thing about it.

“Levi!”

Brianna Turner suddenly stood in front of him, a tube of lip gloss in her hand as usual. She'd apparently just applied it because her lips looked like she'd kissed a bowl of glitter. She wore black-and-white striped leggings and a pink hoodie with sequins around the pockets, even though it was over eighty degrees. She stuffed the lip gloss into the hoodie pocket and flopped down next to him on the bench. Her lip gloss smelled like peaches.

“Hey, Bean,” he said. He still called her that, even though he knew she didn't really like it anymore. He couldn't remember why he had come up with that nickname in the first place. Maybe because she was skinny like a string bean. Or maybe it was just easier to say than *Brianna*.

“Whatcha drawing?” Brianna leaned over to look. Her thick mass of long tight curls—barely held back by a wide sparkly headband—practically took out his eye.

“Nothin'.” Levi tried to hide his sketchpad from her, but she grabbed it away from him.

“Is it a picture of *me*?” she chirped. Brianna always thought everything was about her.

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“Hey!” Levi snatched the sketchpad back, but not before Brianna had caught a faint glimpse of the unfinished image he’d drawn.



“Wait . . . I’ve seen this before!” She squinted—that’s what she did when she was deep in thought. Levi slowly turned the page back in her direction so she could look at it again. “This part is wrong.” She grabbed his pencil and made an adjustment. “See? This is how it goes. Those little knobs are much wavier—”

“You’ve seen it?” Levi said, astonished. “When?”

She took a breath before speaking, as if she wasn’t sure she wanted to tell him about it. “Last night. And the night before. And—most nights before that too.”

Levi blinked, his mouth dropping open. “You saw it—like in a dream?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

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“Seriously?” Brianna whispered. She looked relieved that she wasn’t the only one. “That’s so weird! How come you never told me before?”

“How come you never told *me*?”

She shrugged. “Cause I thought you’d think I was crazy.”

“Same here.”

Brianna—Bean—had been Levi’s best friend for as long as he could remember. Even though at first she’d annoyed the heck out of him. She lived next door in a tiny house with her grandparents and three older sisters. When they were little, she never had anyone her age to play with, so she was always coming over to Levi’s house, wanting to play with him. At first he let her, just because he felt sorry for her. But she would insist on doing things *her* way. Levi’s mom said it was because she was the youngest of her sisters and didn’t have anyone to boss at home.

It drove Levi crazy. Like when Brianna used to make his Avengers action figures have tea parties with her Barbie dolls. Thankfully she’d outgrown that now. But when they played Uno or Monopoly, she would make up her own set of rules and then change them whenever she felt like it. The worst was during kickball, when she would tell all the other team members what they were doing wrong, as if she were the coach. Good thing she didn’t play much kickball anymore, because it might mess up her hair, which had become unbelievably important to her all of a sudden. Levi didn’t get it.

Still, he was used to Brianna now. He liked to hear her tell stories. She read a lot, and she could make

A for Ahoratos

up her own stories about anything. Once, Levi asked her to tell him a story about a blade of grass, and she spouted off an epic adventure about a blade of grass that managed to avoid the lawn mower in all sorts of crazy ways. Brianna made him smile. Even if she *was* way too bossy.

“What do you think it is?” Levi asked her. He knew she’d have an opinion. She always did.

“It’s called an *Alef*. It’s kind of like the letter *A*, except in a different language.”

“How did you know that?”

“Grandpa Tony gave me this old book awhile ago—it has that same symbol on the cover. I used to read the book all the time. I asked Grandpa what the symbol meant and he told me: *A for Ahoratos*.”

Ahoratos! It was the same word Levi heard in his dreams. Such a strange name, it couldn’t be a coincidence. But she pronounced it A-HOR-a-tos, which sounded different from how he’d heard it: A-hor-A-tos. It was close enough. And, besides, her version was probably right anyway.

“What is it—Ahoratos?” Levi asked.

“It’s the name of the kingdom in the book.”

“Well, I never read that book. So why am I dreaming about it?”

“Maybe you did read it and you just don’t remember. Or maybe I told you about it.”

That was possible, Levi thought. Bean talked non-stop, and he didn’t always listen.

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“*Briaaaaaannnnna!* Where are you?” Shrieky girl voices emanated from inside the Rec. “You’re supposed to be helping us!”

“I gotta go in,” Brianna said, jumping up from the bench with a huge sigh. “They can’t do a thing without me.” She looked longingly out at the field, where a game of kickball had just started. She let out a breath and gave Levi a little shove. “Come on. Help us decorate for the dance party. We need someone tall to hang streamers.”

“I don’t do decorating, Bean. That’s girl stuff. I’m going to skate some.”

Her face clouded like she was deeply hurt. But honestly, he couldn’t be seen hanging around with her so much, especially doing things like *decorating*.

“Fine. Be that way.” She spun around and stalked off in a gigantic huff. He shrugged, stuffed his sketchpad in his backpack, grabbed his helmet and skateboard, and headed out to the skate park.

Mr. J. Ar and a few of the other dads had built the skate park next to the Rec so that kids would have a safe place to skate. It had ledges and ramps, a quarter pipe, and even a fun box, which was a big box with a bunch of ramps attached to it. A dozen kids were skating, practicing their ollies and kick flips. Most stopped to high-five Levi as he pumped over to his friends Jeff, Logan, and Mikey at the mini ramp.

“Bout time,” Jeff said. “Too busy talking to your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Levi said, annoyed. He bent down to check the laces on his brand-new Vans.

Black high-tops, with a gold swag on the side. He kind of wanted the other kids to notice them. He was always particular about his shoes, but these were the coolest he'd ever owned. He wasn't supposed to wear them—his mom didn't want him getting them scuffed up before school started—but he needed to break them in. Besides, they were just too awesome *not* to wear.

The skaters took turns on the quarter pipe, working on their kick turns and nose slides. Levi was about to do a run on the fun box when he heard commotion from inside the Rec. Noisy laughter and shouting. The other kids stopped riding and looked in that direction too.

“What’s going on in there?” asked Mikey.

“Let’s go see,” said Levi. The skaters left their boards and hurried into the building. Levi went in first to see Brianna and the girls, still holding party decorations, huddled against the wall. Some of them looked scared, but some were laughing. He caught Brianna’s eye—she was furious.

In the center of the room stood four big, menacing boys. They were laughing like hyenas at a white shape writhing around on the floor. It took Levi a few seconds to realize it was a kid—completely wrapped up in toilet paper.

“Look! It’s a mummy!”

Levi glimpsed a pair of thick red glasses and a knot of dark hair peeking out from the paper wrapping. He sighed. *Manuel*. That dorky smart kid. He was always getting picked on.

Levi heard his skateboarder friends laughing along with the rest. Brianna glared at them, frowning. The

main bully, whose name was Landon, bent over to speak to Manuel in a taunting, falsetto voice.

“He’s crying! I think he misses his mummy!”

More raucous laughter. It was a cruel joke—Landon probably didn’t even know that Manuel’s mom died a year ago. Or maybe he did, and that’s why he said it. He was just that mean. Manuel flailed on the floor, trying to free himself from the wrappings.

“Man, look at that baby,” said Jeff, nudging Levi. “I think he’s gonna start crying.”

“Cut that out!” Brianna marched up to Landon and his crew with her fists balled up, all eighty pounds of her ready to explode. The bullies only laughed louder. Levi moved toward her, wanting to get her out of their line of fire. She brushed him off.

“Mind your own business, *princess*,” Landon sneered, pushing her out of the way. Brianna almost fell, and Levi quelled an impulse to go and help her. She’d just be mad at him for treating her like some fragile doll. Brianna straightened, one hand going up to check that her headband was still in place.

The four boys continued to taunt Manuel, saying, “Hey, what’s the matter, kid? Walk much?” and other stuff like that. Manuel stumbled around, trying to stand up.

Brianna stalked over to Levi, her brown eyes pulsing with fury. “You’ve got to help him!” she whispered hoarsely. Levi took a breath—what could he do anyway? He felt sorry for the kid, but he wasn’t about to get a bloody nose over it, not in front of his friends.

Just then the office door flew open and Mary Stanton, the college student, burst in—a phone in one hand, a Starbucks cup in the other.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded, clearly annoyed at being interrupted from her important texting. She took one look at Manuel and let out a gasp. “What are you kids *doing*?”

“Nothin’, Miss Stanton,” said Landon with mock innocence, trying to keep a straight face. The boys behind him continued to snicker. They didn’t take the college student very seriously—she was certainly no match for four hefty boys.

“You need to get your dad!” Brianna hissed to Levi. “Miss Stanton can’t handle this herself.”

Brianna was right, and Levi knew it. Only Mr. J. Ar could deal with these boys.

Levi was about to turn and run out the door when something caught his eye. A flash, there and gone again, above Landon’s head. Levi blinked, wondering what he was seeing. Before he could dismiss it, there it was again, a golden object a few inches wide, turning slowly in midair, catching the light. Then he realized what it was: the same symbol he had dreamed about nearly every night. The one he’d tried to draw earlier. Everything around him—the boys, the girls, the room—dimmed slightly in comparison to this amazing, incredible sight. It seemed to have its own spotlight. As he stared, his eyes glazed over, kind of like the way they did when he watched TV for too long.

“What’s the matter with you?” Brianna asked, punching him on the shoulder.

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“Can’t you see it?” Levi muttered, pointing to the thing over Landon’s head.

“See what?”

Brianna turned in the direction he was looking, and when she caught her breath, Levi knew she could see it too. He was secretly relieved. Glad to know he wasn’t just making all this up in his head.

They both stared in silence, ignoring the commotion around them. There it was—that symbol. A for *Ahoratos*. Hovering in the air, shimmering as if bathed in some celestial light all its own. Yet no one else seemed aware of it. Only Levi and Brianna.

Levi’s dad burst in. “What’s going on in here?” His deep voice echoed through the room, jolting the duo out of their trance. The bullies backed off, and the laughter stopped. Big, barrel-chested Mr. J. Ar commanded everyone’s attention.

He went over to help Manuel to his feet. Mary Stanton rushed in as well, eager to help now that the danger was averted for the moment.

“You okay, son?” Mr. J. Ar asked.

Manuel nodded, apparently too shaken up to speak. Mr. J. Ar handed him over to Miss Stanton, who helped unravel him enough for him to walk with her toward the office.

Mr. J. Ar’s ferocious eyes turned to the four bullies. Levi got a little chill. He knew what it was like to have those eyes stare down at him when he’d done something wrong. His dad’s eyes could be full of kindness, but push the wrong buttons and they’d bore a hole into your soul.

“Hey, we didn’t hurt him.” Landon looked defiantly into those intimidating eyes. He didn’t seem to be afraid of Mr. J. Ar at all. That kid was braver—or dumber—than Levi thought.

“You boys go on home now.” Mr. J. Ar didn’t raise his voice—he didn’t have to.

Landon held that iron-hard gaze a moment longer, then let out a laugh and sauntered toward the door, trailed by his friends. “Just having fun,” he muttered as he went. The symbol went too, hovering over Landon’s head, bigger and more real than ever.

“We need to get that thing!” Brianna whispered, pulling Levi toward the door.

“No, Bean, you’re crazy.” But he went anyway, still curious about the strange symbol and also nervous that Brianna might try to confront those boys again. She still needed protection, even if she didn’t think so.

When they got outside the door, they saw that Landon had stopped at the water fountain for a drink. The symbol hovered over his head, still turning slowly, still glowing.

“Now’s our chance! While he’s not looking!” Brianna whispered. The other boys had continued walking, so Landon was alone for the moment.

“I’ll do it,” Levi said, stepping in front of her. “He’ll just knock you flat.” *He’ll probably knock me flat, too, but at least I can take it better.* He casually walked to where Landon was bent over the fountain, acting as if he was just going to stand in line for a drink. Then, he reached above Landon’s head toward the rotating object.

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At that exact moment Landon straightened, knocking into Levi's arm. The kid whirled on him, his big face reddening.

"Hey, idiot! What's up with you?"

"Nothing," Levi said, smoothing his hand over his hair casually. "I just . . . saw this giant bug about to land on your head, so I was swatting it away."

"A bug?" Landon suddenly looked worried.

"Yeah, one of those big black things—what do you call them?"

"It was a black-horned Wolfwinger," Brianna said, in her I'm-way-smarter-than-you voice. "Also known as the *Lupinas Ala . . . Maribunta*. The worst kind. A stinger the size of a ballpoint pen. Usually they aim for the eyes, to shoot poison right into your brain."

Landon's eyes grew big, then small again. "You're just making that up," he said.

"Am not," Brianna retorted, perfectly serious. "Can't believe you've never seen one before. It's *Maribunta* season right now. Didn't you read the poster inside describing what to do in the event of a *Maribunta* bite?"

Levi tried to hide his grin. Brianna loved to tell stories. And apparently Landon believed her.

"What—?" Landon started. Then he waved her away, dismissing the idea. "No way—"

Levi shouted. "There it is again! Duck!"

Levi and Brianna faked a duck, but Landon went down almost to the concrete, covering his whole head in fear. This was the moment Levi was waiting for. He grabbed for the symbol. It was real all right, solid like stone, which surprised him because it looked

transparent. See-through. He didn't have much time to think about it, though, because there was a strange, irresistible pulling sensation, as if he were being sucked up into the sky. Bean had grabbed his elbow, so she felt it too. She gasped. It seemed as though the whole world around them was spinning, twisting into a vortex, like water going down a drain. Levi had an impulse to let go, make it all stop, but he found he couldn't. Maybe he didn't really want to. It was scary—but he had to know what was going to happen next. The world around him was spinning so fast he couldn't catch his breath. He held tight to the weird *A* thing, Brianna clinging to his other arm.

"Leviiiiiiii!" He could hear her voice, but it sounded far away, caught up in the wind. Everything—the Rec, the grass, the trees, Landon—swirled together in a maze of color and then disappeared altogether.

Landon peeked out from under his arms, searching for the horrible bugs with the deadly stingers. He didn't see any bugs, and he also didn't see those two kids either. Where'd they go? *Ran away*, he thought. Although he'd only been down there for a couple seconds. Strange. Either way, they were gone now. Scaredy cats. Made up that stupid story about big bugs. Maybe. Probably. Yeah. As if that would scare him. He straightened, glancing around to make sure no one had seen him crouched on the ground. He stuck out his chest and strode away. Next time he saw those two kids, he'd get 'em back for that.

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Levi and Brianna stood together, staring around them in wonder. They couldn't see the weird letter *A* anymore. They couldn't see anything, for that matter.

"Where are we?" Brianna said.

"I have no idea," Levi answered. He looked around, trying to get his bearings. As far as he could see, there was nothing but white sand and red sky.

CHAPTER THREE

Imagining Dragons

Dinner was quiet. Evan didn't want to talk to anyone. He couldn't even look at his brother. Right after dinner he went to his room and did some major sulking. He'd been sent to bed early. No basketball at the Rec. For something that wasn't even his fault. Well, it wasn't *all* his fault anyway.

He picked up a book he'd been reading, one his dad had given him for Christmas last year. He hadn't really liked it at first because it seemed like an old book, and usually he found old books pretty boring. But this book wasn't boring at all. It was about a fierce warrior (who was also a prince, of course) who lived in a place called Ahoratos, a beautiful land of giant castles and tall mountains and fanciful creatures that were sometimes a little frightening. It was a good story, with lots of battles and sword fighting, which was perfect because these were the only kinds of stories Evan really liked to read. The Prince Warrior was constantly having to save his kingdom from these awful dragons who kept attacking and burning down his villages with their fire breath and stealing all the people's gold. Sometimes the Prince Warrior had to rescue the princesses, who were always getting themselves in one mess or another. Evan didn't really care much for that part.

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He went to the closet and pulled out his pretend armor. He didn't want his big brother to know he still played with it. He put on the breastplate, the belt, the helmet. They were only plastic, and they were getting way too small for him. Plus they were old-fashioned. He wished he could get a newer, cooler set, like from *Star Wars* or *Thor*, but he wouldn't dare ask for that. Xavier would just make fun of him—even though Evan knew for a fact that Xavier still had the cape from a Batman costume he wore to a party in the sixth grade.

Evan picked up the wooden sword and shield—his grandpa had made them for him when Evan was six. The shield had his initial, *E*, emblazoned in gold right in the middle. He swung the sword while he danced around the room, fighting the imaginary dragon that had started to look an awful lot like his brother. Xavier the dragon! Evan the Prince Warrior! The Prince Warrior always won.

Prince Warrior: 1,116,437

Dragon: 0

Finally he got tired. He shoved the armor under his bed with all the other stuff he never bothered to put away and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He heard the door slam downstairs. Xavier was home from basketball. Evan quickly finished in the bathroom and went into his room to put on his pajamas, shutting the door tight. At least they didn't have to share a room anymore, the way they used to in their apartment in the city.

He crawled into bed with his book and flashlight to read under the covers. He could hear his brother using

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the bathroom and getting ready for bed. *Clean the toothpaste out of the sink*, he thought. Xavier never cleaned the sink. It was disgusting.

He waited for Xavier to come into his room, to tease him about missing basketball, about being afraid to jump off the dock, about, well . . . *anything*. There always seemed to be an excuse for Xavier to barge in and torment him. But nothing happened. Evan was sort of disappointed. Maybe Xavier didn't even think about him enough to come in and tease him anymore.

When the door finally did open, it was Mom who came in. Evan quickly switched off the flashlight and hid the book under the covers.

"Feeling any better?" she asked, sitting down beside him on the bed. She reached under the covers and pulled the book and flashlight out. She laid them on top of the covers next to Evan's pillow. She wasn't mad. Just wanted him to know that she knew. Always did. *She definitely has eyes in the back of her head*, Evan thought.

She waited for his answer to her question. Evan was in no mood for a Mom Talk. He looked away and pulled the covers up to his chin. He heard her sigh.

"Evan, I know you were mad at your brother, but you need to find some way to deal with it other than fighting. These skirmishes have to stop."

"What's a skirmish?"

"It's like a battle, only shorter. Evan, do you get what I'm saying?"

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Evan didn't answer. He tried to turn over, but she grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back, forcing him to look at her.

"Yeah, I get what you're saying. I'll . . . try," Evan said sullenly. "No more squishes."

"Skirmishes."

"Right."

"Good." She smiled, kissed him on the forehead, and got up to leave.

"Mom?" Evan pulled down his covers. Mom turned to look at him.

"What is it, honey?"

"Do you think I'll ever be in a—*real* battle?"

Mom's mouth opened slightly, and her eyes flitted around the room like she didn't know quite what to say. Then she sort of smiled.

"Oh yes, baby," she said. "You already are."

"I am?" Evan sat up, alarmed. Mom came to sit beside him again.

"You and Xavier—"

"I'm not talking about a . . . skirmish or anything like that. I mean a *real* battle. With swords and stuff."

"Oh, this *is* a real battle, Evan. There's a sneaky, malicious enemy that you are always in a battle with—even now."

"Xavier?"

"No, it's not Xavier."

"Then who is it?"

"Someone who wants to remain hidden so that you'll forget he's even there. He'll do everything he can to make you feel like you will never win."

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“Will I . . . win, I mean?”

Mom thought about this for a while. “It won’t be easy,” she said finally. “But just remember this, Evan: no matter what this enemy throws at you, you *always* have what you need to win. So you never have to be scared. Capeesh?”

She meant, “Do you understand?” Mom had lots of weird words for stuff.

“Capeesh,” Evan said, agreeing even though he wasn’t so sure he *did* understand. “But about this enemy . . .”

“We’ll talk more tomorrow,” Mom said, winking at him. “Sweet dreams, Evan love.”

Once she’d kissed him good night again (she loved gooey kisses), Evan lay back and pulled the covers up to his chin once more. Thinking about real battles sort of scared him, even though his mom had said he didn’t have to be scared. He peered outside at the silver moon peeking through the branches of the big old oak. The moon was huge, bigger than he’d ever seen. Full. He started to imagine himself in his shiny armor, a Prince Warrior, riding a white horse through the mist toward some big castle on the top of a high mountain. What a cool picture that would be. He thought about getting up, getting out his colored pencils, and drawing it. The moon, the tree, the mountain, Prince Evan on a white horse. He yawned. Maybe tomorrow.

His eyes closed . . .

“Get up!”

Evan sprang upright, his book and flashlight falling to the floor with a thud.

“What?” He rubbed his eyes, searching for the owner of the voice. Was it a voice? He couldn’t be sure. The room was dark. Eerie shadows moved around him, shadows of the tree branches in the yard shifting under the full moon.

“Hurry!”

Yes, a voice—soft, whispery, yet loud at the same time—filling his whole head.

“Come!”

A shadow darted across the room. Not the tree branch shadow, but a *creature* sort of shadow. A raccoon? A cat? No, too big for that. But too small for a person. The shadow jumped into the windowsill. In the moonlight Evan could make out a flowing garment, like a robe. A purple robe. The shadow creature turned away, revealing a glowing symbol on its back—Evan’s mouth opened and closed involuntarily.

The symbol was the same one that was on the cover of his book. The book about Ahoratos.

Who are you? he wanted to ask. But no words came out of his mouth. It wouldn’t open at all now. He just stared. The creature’s head swiveled around, but Evan could not make out a face in the hood—as if the hood were actually *empty*.

“Hurry! Before it’s too late!”



“Too late . . .” Evan’s words started working but each one seemed to take forever to come out. “For . . . what?”

Suddenly the bedroom door burst open, and Xavier stomped in.

“Evan, there was this thing in my room—”

Evan’s eyes flicked to his brother, who wore a wide-eyed expression. He turned back to the creature sitting in the window. *So he sees it too. I’m not imagining it.* Very slowly, Evan lifted his arm until his finger pointed directly to the silhouette of the *thing* sitting on the sill.

He heard Xavier gasp. “What . . . is . . . it . . . ?” He was having the same trouble with words that Evan had.

The creature spoke impatiently. “*Prince Evan, Prince Xavier. Follow me! Quickly!*” And then it disappeared out the window. The *second-floor* window.

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Evan glanced at his brother's frozen face. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. Maybe they both had. But Evan didn't think so. He was suddenly filled with curiosity. He had to know what that creature was and what the big hurry was all about.

Evan jumped out of bed and headed for the windowsill.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Xavier hissed at him.

"He said we had to go with him!" Evan replied. The curtains of the window blew riotously, as if a storm were brewing outside. Evan looked out, scanning the darkness. The creature was nowhere to be seen. But there was something else—something glowing in the night air. There it was again! The same symbol from the book. It was huge, transparent yet somehow solid, shimmering as it spun slowly, suspended in space.

He heard the voice again. "*Come!*"

"Evan, you can't jump—you'll break your legs!" Xavier had come up beside him. He saw it too—the weird glowing object hovering in the air. "What is . . . ?" His voice trailed off.

Maybe it's a dream, Evan thought. It had to be. In which case, what harm could it do to follow the shadow creature and see what would happen next?

"Let's go!" Evan said.

"Wait!" Xavier nearly shouted. But Evan ignored him. It was only a dream.

He jumped.

Evan only dropped down a few inches before his feet hit the ground. Weird. Then his feet started sinking into thick black muck. Mud maybe. But different. Sticky. More like . . . cake batter. He turned around to face the window he'd just jumped out of, but it wasn't there anymore. The whole house was gone. He looked up. Above him the sky was bright—*red*. Not a peaceful, sunset red. It was a bright, fiery red. Like the sun had bled its colors all over the universe. He looked to his right and left. All around him stood tall trees with large black leaves, so close together there didn't seem to be any light between them. The trees were growing—getting taller as he watched, thicker, sprouting black leaves, blocking out the red sky. They encircled him, like giant, hideous soldiers, closing in. He was completely surrounded.

He heard a squishy, goopy sound and turned to see his brother standing in the cake batter next to him. Evan was surprised to see fear in Xavier's wide eyes. He'd always thought Xavier wasn't afraid of anything.

They looked at each other, but neither spoke, all their combined emotions muddling together and making it hard to know what to think or do. The silence, for that brief moment, was deafening.

Then the purple-robed creature appeared before them, making them both nearly jump out of their skins.

"Follow me!" The creature plunged into the circle of thickening trees, its gait a sort of waddling glide, half-leaping, half-running, like a turkey trying to fly. As it went, the leaves of the trees changed from black to

vivid purple, dripping like fresh paint as if they had been stained by the creature's robe.

"We need to go that way," Evan said, indicating the purple leaves.

"But how? There's no path or anything."

This was true. Around them the huge black trees loomed, growing ever taller. The little splash of purple leaves seemed like their only hope.

"It said to follow. That's where it went. So, let's go!" Evan used all his strength to make his feet work, pulling them out of the cake batter-y muck to take a step forward. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be. He took another step, heading for the splotch of purple in the dense wall of trees. He noticed the purple leaves beginning to tremble, as if stirred by a sudden wind. But as he got closer he realized they were actually *parting*, revealing a narrow pathway marked by more purple leaves. The creature appeared at the end of the purple trail, glowing as if from its own inner light, still moving quickly and yet somehow never quite out of sight.

Evan turned to Xavier. "Let's go! This way!"

"Coming!"

The two boys started to run toward the purple path, Evan leading the way for once. It was like running in molasses, like one of those dreams where someone is chasing you but you can't seem to get away. But once they started, it became easier. They found as they picked up speed their feet didn't sink anymore, like they were running on top of the mud, feeling the wet splashes up their pajama pant legs. Before them the purple leaves

trembled and parted, leaning away from the path as if to welcome them and give them room to pass through. Evan thought they were actually waving to him, calling out: *This way, this way*. Up ahead, just barely visible, the little guy in the purple robe continued to zigzag through the trees, drenching the leaves in purpleness as he went, opening up the path for them to follow.

“Hey, wait up!” said Xavier. He was having trouble keeping up with Evan, which was definitely a new thing. Evan found he was starting to like this dream a tiny bit.

Then a loud rumble sounded overhead, stopping Evan in his tracks. *Was that thunder?* But the rumble didn’t stop. It grew and grew, making the huge black trees around them quake as if with fear. Evan looked up at the sky, which was changing from bright red to purple-black, like a bad bruise.

Xavier caught up, panting. “What was that?” Evan didn’t answer. He was too scared to speak. They heard a loud crack, and then a tree right next to them split open, its edges glowing red like embers from a roaring fire.

“Lightning!” Xavier said. But not normal lightning. This lightning was way too close—as if it was aiming straight for *them*. Another crack, and another nearby tree split and shriveled, burned to a crisp in an instant.

“Watch out!” Xavier cried. They dodged out of the way as the blackened tree began to topple over, crashing to the ground in a shower of sparks. Evan felt his courage evaporate. If this was a dream, it was getting way too scary: the deadly lightning, the falling trees, the growing rumble that seemed to shake the forest

to its roots, the ominous blackening of the sky. Evan wanted to wake up now.

He felt his brother's hand on his shoulder. "Let's keep going," Xavier said, as if knowing what Evan was thinking. "Just . . . don't look back, whatever you do."

Evan nodded, fighting back tears. He wouldn't let Xavier see *that*, that's for sure. He looked toward the purple leaves, the trail that seemed to be their only way forward. The darkness was closing in around them.

Evan heard the creature's voice in his head. Kind of like his own, but different somehow. Deeper. More certain of itself. *Stay on the trail. Don't look back*, it said.

So Evan didn't.

Xavier could just make out the little creature in the robe, darting this way and that, drenching the leaves of the trees in brilliant purple as it went. How did it move so fast? Xavier couldn't even tell if it had legs.

He kept checking to make sure Evan was still with him—he couldn't lose his brother. Mom would kill him.

Mom. Dad. Where were they? What was this world he and his brother had jumped into? He glanced up at the purple-red sky, which seemed to be moving, swirling almost, like a storm gathering. A bad one. All around him trees were splitting open, glowing red and then shriveling, falling, and sending up billows of ashes. Charred, smoldering branches rained down on either side of them, so close Xavier could feel the hot

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embers prickling his skin. He swatted at them as if they were alive, like swarming mosquitos. Maybe Evan was right—maybe this really was a dream and nothing bad could happen to them. Maybe. But Xavier had never felt a shivering in his soul like this in any other dream before.

He heard a high-pitched yelp and turned to see Evan trapped beneath a fallen tree branch. Above him, the rest of the seared tree was creaking and popping as it started to tip over. Xavier ran back to Evan, who was clawing the thick muck to free himself.

“I’m stuck!” Evan cried, panicking now as the falling tree loomed over them. Xavier lifted the branch and grabbed hold of his brother, ripping the bottom of Evan’s pant leg as he pulled him up. The boys scrambled away just as the tree crashed behind them in a fountain of glowing ash.

“Ouch!” Evan wiped some ash off his arm where it burned his skin a little.

“You okay?” Xavier asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Xavier tried to look at Evan’s arm, but his brother pulled away roughly.

Don’t stop! The voice again, in their heads, bouncing off the trees. Xavier and Evan lurched once more toward the purple path. Behind them the falling trees made hideous noises, like agonizing screams. *Do trees feel pain?* Xavier wondered. It sounded to him like the whole world was crying out in terror and fear, the darkness closing in on them.

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Where are we going? When are we going to get there? Will this ever end? he wondered.

And then suddenly it did. The trail opened to a large body of water, its still surface reflecting the blotched red and purple sky. The water seemed to have no end—as big as an ocean, stretching to the stormy horizon. It was eerily calm in contrast to the backdrop of crashing trees and crackling lightning, the ever-growing rumble like an earthquake gathering under their feet. The water didn't move, not even a ripple.

"Whoa," said Evan. He was panting, his hands on his knees. He glanced behind him, poised to bolt if necessary. "Where do we go now?"

Xavier had no answer. It seemed as though they were trapped between the black trees and the tranquil water—there was nowhere else *to go*.

"Follow me!"

Both boys jumped, turning their attention to the lake. There, hovering over the mirrorlike surface of the water, was the purple-robed creature. "*Into the Water!*" the voice boomed, nearly drowning out the sounds of chaos behind them. Then the creature just—disappeared, like it was sucked right into the water.

Into the water? Xavier took a breath, wondering what it meant.

"He'll come back, right?" said Evan. He had to shout to make himself heard over the noise of the world collapsing behind them. "He just went to get us—a boat?"

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“Under the water?” Xavier shouted back. “You think maybe he went to get us a submarine?”

“It’s just a dream!” Evan cried, lifting his head with newfound confidence. As if he was trying to convince himself. “It’s like *Kingdom Quest*.”

“So we’re dreaming we’re in a video game? Both of us? Together?”

“Sure!” said Evan. “Why not? Anything can happen in a dream. Hey, look!”

Evan pointed at the water. Xavier looked. The still surface had begun to ripple slightly, changing color. An image appeared on the water, golden, as if touched by an unseen sun.

“It’s that thing from my book again!” Evan cried, pointing. “Let’s go!”

“You’re going in?” asked Xavier. He couldn’t believe it—was this the same kid who earlier that day had been afraid to jump in the pond? Then he remembered—this was a dream. That’s what Evan thought, anyway. Although it seemed less and less like a dream to Xavier.

Another jolt of lightning cracked right over their heads. The rumbling sound had become deafening—Xavier had the impression that some giant boulder was rolling straight toward them, flattening everything in its path.

“Hurry!” Evan cried. He turned and leaped into the water with both feet.

“Evan!” Xavier tried to grab his brother, but he was already gone, the water swallowing him up, closing

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over him like a door. Xavier was left standing helplessly at the edge of the lake. He thought he saw a faint tinge of red appear on the glassy surface. He hoped he would wake up soon, before this dream got any worse.