

The Goodhost Dilemma

As their grandfather taught them, Keith and Kathy dutifully, yet silently, went about their chores in the brewing room. Grandfather had always been particular about the cleaning up and the setting of the spells that surrounded the big barrels and had cautioned them, as often as they helped, that there was to be no unwarranted talking or chattering. The beer never set right if someone was carrying on a conversation over the spells. The rule went double for arguing, so Keith and Kathy swept the floor, cleaned the spigots, and stirred the pot, all the while staring daggers at each other.

As only members of the Goodhost family were allowed in the brewing rooms, Keith and Kathy each took a side of the day's cask and slowly carried it up the stairs, hoisting and yanking the heavy thing, so that even when they were out of earshot of the cellar below, they were too out of breath to continue their argument.

Depositing their burden in the tap room upstairs, the pair finished their afternoon chores under the merry eye of Fancie, the inn's cook. Glares were still tossed between the brother and sister, but neither wanted to share the details of the fight with Fancie. Though they suspected she knew they were arguing. Chores done, and a fresh tea cake in hand, Kathy and Keith went upstairs to Grandfather's room. Half way up the stairs to the next floor, their fight resumed in earnest.

"We've got to do something," Kathy whined.

"I know that, dummy," Keith said churlishly. "I know as well as you do that Uncle Rummy is no good, but I think we should call . . . that one."

"How can you know he would even come? At least a Royal Wizard lives in the same country and world as we do."

"I know he would come. That's his job," Keith hissed. Their voices naturally lowering as they reached the landing. "He must come if you call him."

Kathy rounded on her brother, fisted hands on her hips, "Then call to him. Do it right now."

Keith gave her a defiant look, "Well, I will, but not right now."

"Admit it, you don't really think he'll come."

"Will too."

"Will not."

"Children," Mrs. Parkins had stuck her head out from their grandfather's room. "You are late and your whispering vexatious." She swung the door wide to allow for the now sullen children to pass by. "Your grandfather looks forward to your daily visits. You shouldn't come to them with fights between yourselves."

Kathy looked up at Mrs. Parkins as she sat in a chair next to Grandfather's bed. "How do you know, ma'am?"

"How do I know what?" Mrs. Parkins replied shortly as she tidied up the dresser top. It was covered with bottles of every color, filled with medicines Mrs. Parkins used on Grandfather.

Kathy narrowed her eyes watching the woman closely. "How do you know Grandfather looks forward to our visits?"

Mrs. Parkins was a wiry, thin person with graying hair to match. A firm chin and a small mouth gave her a look of unkindness, and the children had wondered if her personality had informed her looks or if it was the other

way around. However, her eyes were bright and sharp and neither Kathy nor Keith wished those eyes trained on them.

Mrs. Parkins turned to Kathy. Keith squirmed, wanting to take Kathy's hand, but was fearful of Mrs. Parkins noticing. Her mouth spread wide, in an approximation of a smile, "Of course he does. Wouldn't any grandfather feel that way about his two little grandchildren?"

She strode towards the door. "Now do be quiet. He needs his rest. I will return shortly before you have to go down to help with dinner." The door clicked shut behind her, but it was several minutes before either child felt it was safe to talk again. Keith got up to activate the ward that sealed the door with a silence spell and sat back down. They looked at their old grand dad lying comatose in his bed before them. His cheeks were sunken and his face was grizzled, unshaven. His normally close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair was grown out and bushy around the pillow. His mouth was slightly open. If it had been any other person, the children would have been frightened, but he was still their dear old Grandfather and their hearts twisted with sadness and remorse that he should be lying there so.

They didn't even have the heart to resume their argument.

He'd come down ill some two months back, but it was a kind of ill no one had ever seen or heard of before. One afternoon, he came up from the brewing room and was pale and sweaty and went directly to his office off the kitchen without saying a word. Before the hour was out he had fallen asleep at his desk and he wouldn't wake up.

The inn's staff and the townsfolk all helped to take care of him for the first few days. Then Uncle Rummy came in a carriage-and-four with Mrs. Parkins. As the carriage had stopped in front of the inn, many people along the street had come out to see what rich person had come to town. Heath Corning was a small town along the Kings' Highway, the folk there often saw fancy carriages traveling through but most of them did not stop.

Keith and Kathy had gone out to see too. The carriage was very grand and the man who got out was grander still, with a tall, glossy hat, the gold waistcoat buttons straining under his bulk and a shiny gold chain dangling from his pocket watch. No one seemed to know who he was.

As soon as Uncle Rummy announced himself as Rumald Goodhost everybody seemed to remember him. He told those within hearing that he was Grandfather's long-lost brother come back to take care of the family holdings during his brother's illness. Most people nodded in agreement and went back to their own business or stepped closer to further admire the carriage. The children were overjoyed to hear it. Yet, when they looked at each other, smiles covering their faces, they both remembered that Grandfather had no brother, only two sisters who had married away from town. Keith whispered to his sister, "Grandfather never said."

"As much as he grumbled about Dad being a Disappointment for running off to Kingsbury, you'd have thought we'd have heard about a runaway brother," Kathy whispered back.

Mr. Wizener, the hostler, was one of the few people who frowned at the pompous man. "Old man Goodhost doesn't have a brother. I should remember as we grew up together, near enough as brothers."

"My dear old chap," said Uncle Rummy standing on the stairs to the inn, "Is that you? You don't remember the long hours we played as lads in the hills over yonder?" Uncle Rummy pointed to Pole Hill and Monk Hill on the other side of town. Mr. Wizener turned to look over his shoulder.

When he looked back around he had a soft look about his eyes. "Why yes, yes of course I remember. Can I see to these horses for you sir?"

Keith and Kathy shared a look, eyes wide with alarm.

“Why yes, my good man. Just let me retrieve Mrs. Parkins, the nurse I brought with me.” He leaned into the carriage and escorted Mrs. Parkins out. “Please see to it that our bags are brought right along.”

The carriage driver, in bright red livery, took up the reins and followed Mr. Wizener around the building. Kathy watched him as he drove away, trying to think of what seemed wrong. She pointed the driver out to her brother.

“He seems rather flat as if there wasn’t much to him,” Keith nodded, both of them getting a nervous feeling.

Uncle Rummy and Mrs. Parkins made a grand entrance to the inn. The children following on their heels. Mrs. Oddly, the housekeeper, had already gathered the staff, who crowded the entry hall and into the dining room, to welcome the newcomers. Keith and Kathy watched everything from a corner just inside the door, neither speaking a word.

As Uncle Rummy made grand pronouncements about how nothing would change while the inn was under his care, the children watched the faces of people whom they knew like family change from polite masks to warm adoration. It seemed that whomever Uncle Rummy spoke to, grew to love him immediately.

There were a few times when either Kathy or Keith would be listening to his words and their expression would soften and their eyes begin to shine. Fortunately, it didn’t happen to them at the same time, so they would give each other a nudge and a stern look and go back to wondering who this strange man could be.

“Now, where are my great-niece and great-nephew?” Uncle Rummy announced looking vaguely about the room. Mrs. Parkins stood primly by his side looking at no one at all. The rest of the staff turned to the corner where the children were lingering and, seeming of one mind, opened a path between the newcomers and the children. As Uncle Rummy came towards them, Keith and Kathy grasped hands, something they had not done since they were very young.

“My dearest children, it is so good to meet you,” said the large man as he sank to one knee, quite unstably, his waistcoat straining at the seams, to look them in the face. “Would you be so kind as to show me to your Grandfather’s room? Perhaps after I pay my respects to my brother you could show me the inn? I’m sure there have been great changes since last I was here.”

Keith and Kathy exchanged a worried glance, then nodded their heads in unison. The inn’s staff, hovering around them, broke into heartfelt smiles. Wanting to get away from the creepiness that seemed to affect everyone they knew, the children led the man through the crowd to the stairs. Mrs. Parkins followed.

Their Grandfather lay as he had for the past three days, looking for all the world as if he were peaceably asleep. Mrs. Parkins immediately went about her work as nurse for Grandfather. She unloaded a number of vials and remedies onto the dresser, then went about examining furnishings in the room.

Uncle Rummy spent a minute hovering next to the bed looking solemn before he turned back to Keith and Kathy. “Now, how about that tour?”

Reluctantly, they took him around the building, starting with the family’s private rooms which were next to Grandfather’s, then to the guest bedrooms. Here, after looking into every room that was unoccupied, he chose one for himself and one for Mrs. Parkins. They took him down to the main room and then to the dining room, the kitchen, and the storeroom. In each place he said something boisterous and complimentary so that any of the staff nearby would hear.

They finished by showing him Grandfather’s office. Uncle Rummy settled himself in behind the desk and rifled through some of the papers there. Kathy and Keith watched him closely. Knowing that they were watch-

ing him, he hemmed and hawed his way through the accounts book and the merchant orders before looking up at them. “Now, how about showing me the brewing cellar?”

Before Kathy could stop him, Keith said, “But only Goodhosts are allowed.”

Uncle Rummy smiled benevolently at them. “I am a Goodhost. My name is Rumald Goodhost, but you may call me Uncle Rummy.” There was power in his voice and it seemed to reverberate in the tiny office. Again he smiled but this time with the air of a cat about to make a kill. “Show me the brewing room.”

Scared to their marrow the children went out the office door, left down a short, windowless hallway and up to the door of the cellar stairs. Kathy, wanting to get it over with and away from the stranger, went to turn the key in the lock, but was stopped by Keith. “We’re not allowed,” he whispered in her ear. But Uncle Rummy had caught up with them by then and reached his large hand between them to open the door himself. After that, there was nothing to it but to lead him downstairs.

When they reached the bottom of the large square room, Uncle Rummy took a deep breath, “Ah, it smells delicious in here.” He went directly to the tin cup hooked to the wall by the giant barrels, then bent over to pour himself a taste of the freshest beer.

Keith stuttered in a whisper, “What is he doing?” While Kathy muttered the proper incantation for drawing the ale.

Uncle Rummy took a long gulp and smacked his lips with pleasure. “Delicious. The best beer in all the worlds.”

“The best beer in the six counties, you mean,” Kathy said in a small voice. “Grandfather says that we’ve no need to win any awards elsewhere. Then people from far off will come to steal our recipes and spells.”

Uncle Rummy looked down at the girl with eyes that seemed to be really seeing her for the first time. She felt really small when he looked at her like that. “Yes, of course. No one must steal the secrets to the Goodhost’s wonderful beer.”

Still drinking from the tin cup, he wandered the rest of the room, vaguely inspecting the various bags, tins, boxes, casks and other items stored in the corners and nooks. When he got to the threshold of the doorway to the long tunnel, he stopped and peered in. For a reason that was never told to the children, the doorway was framed, but had no door. The tunnel, seen from the brewing room was dark after only a few feet. Yet there was a constant slight breeze that came through.

“We’re not to go in there, sir,” Keith said.

He turned back to the boy. “You’ve never felt curious enough to go exploring in there?”

“Um, no sir. Grandfather said that it leads to a no good place.”

“I see,” said Uncle Rummy, rocking back on his heels. “Are you both taking good care of the brewing process? You do know all the proper methods for brewing don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” the children said in unison.

“Doesn’t anybody else know? None of the inn’s employees perhaps?”

“No, sir,” said Kathy.

Keith continued, “Grandfather was very particular that no one else learn how we make it or even come down here.”

“That’s why Grandfather is still Disappointed that our father went off to Kingsbury to follow his dream,” Kathy added, making disappointed sound like a very bad thing to be.

“His dream?” asked Uncle Rummy, “What would that be?”

“To be a pastry chef, sir,” said Keith. “He loved to bake, ever so much, and had the magic for it too.”

“Now he bakes in the King’s castle,” Kathy said with a bit of pride. “But Grandfather won’t forgive him for abandoning his duties to the family.”

“Nor to us,” Keith said sadly.

“Where’s your mother then?”

“Died,” the kids said together. Keith went on, “When we were born.”

“Ah, I’m very sorry. I did not know,” said Uncle Rummy soothingly.

Keith, having had his feathers ruffled by having to speak of his parents, always a sore spot for the boy, wanted to shout at the fancy man that he didn’t know because he wasn’t family, but Kathy elbowed him and he kept quiet.

Uncle Rummy turned back to the dark tunnel. “So you never go in here, eh?” he said quietly, mostly to himself, rocking again on his heels. He wandered over to the huge fireplace, and examined the large round kettles stored on the hearth. Peering into one, he said, “Ho, ho, who is this little fellow?”

The children ran over to look into the largest of the kettles. Inside was a little man-shaped creature, no taller than a forearm, wearing a muddy yellow shift. Blue hair sprouted from his head in tufts and made his gray skin look even duller. The creature was clearly sleeping, making tiny snorts and snores.

“It’s an imp, sir,” said Kathy helpfully.

“So it is,” said Uncle Rummy. “Got into the beer did it?”

To Keith it seemed that Uncle Rummy knew that it was an imp, but couldn’t make out why he would pretend he didn’t know. “They come from the tunnel sometimes and they really like to drink when the beer is not quite fermented. They can’t drink much, being so small, but we find them like this sometimes when they drink too much.”

“Grandfather said their magic helps to make the beer taste better,” Kathy added. The little thing, slurped and snorted and woke itself up. Groggily it raised its glassy black eyes upward to see the three heads looking down at it. It shrieked and jumped high in the air, causing all three people to stand back quickly. Landing softly outside the kettle, it dashed away through the tunnel.

“Now,” said Uncle Rummy, “What time of day do you do your chores down here?”

Frowning, Keith said, “Our usual chores we do after school, but since Grandfather got . . . took ill, we are doing his morning chores as well.”

“Yes, of course,” said the man distractedly, ushering the children back up the stairs. “I believe I have seen everything now. Why don’t you run along to visit with your Grandfather and send Mrs. Parkins to me downstairs.” At the top of the stairs he gave each a little push to send them on their way.

The did as they were told. They ran almost as if they had to. Arriving breathless and panting at the door of Grandfather’s bedroom. Mrs. Parkins turned her sharp eyes on them and they suddenly found they needed to hold their breath. When they were quiet, Mrs. Parkins used her pointy chin to indicate that Kathy should speak. “Uncle Rummy asked for you to come downstairs. We’re to sit with Grandfather.”

“Very well then,” she answered. She turned and did some rearranging of the medicines on the dresser behind her. The children sat down. “Now don’t go making a fuss or noise. Your grandfather needs his rest.”

When she left the room, Keith and Kathy suddenly very much needed to breathe. They gulped in great quantities of air and then panted while they tried to recover.

“This is no good,” Keith finally gasped out.

“There is something very wrong with those two,” Kathy agreed, a little more recovered than her brother. “Did you see how everyone just believed him? It’s like none of them have lived their whole lives in Heath Corning.”

“Mr. Wizener didn’t believe him at first.” Keith considered a moment, leaning his head back against the wall. “I think he must be using a spell.”

“Of course he is,” said Kathy angrily, she had always been a bit quicker on the uptake than her twin. “Why do you think we ran up those stairs as we did?”

Enlightenment dawned on Keith’s face, “Yes, I think you’re right.” Kathy folded her arms and set her chin in a “of course I’m right” manner. “Do you think his voice is spelled?”

“I think it goes deeper than that. He must be a very powerful wizard, even an enchanter.”

“But what does he want? The beer?”

Kathy rolled her eyes, but Keith was still looking up at the ceiling and didn’t see her. “If that’s what he wanted, he would have it already.” Kathy thought a moment. “He must want to stay here, at least awhile. He picked out the nicest rooms for Mrs. Parkins and himself.”

“I don’t know Kath, why did they come now? How could that Uncle Rummy have known that Grandfather had taken ill? It was only three days ago.” Keith sat up fast, turning to his sister. “If no one remembered that Grandfather supposedly has a brother, who could have informed him?”

Kathy’s face crumpled into tears. “I don’t know. I don’t know that, but Grandfather’s illness was so sudden.” She went to the bed and took hold of Grandfather’s hand lying above the coverlet. “Oh, Grandad, what’s happening?” She laid her head on his chest. Keith got up to stand beside her. He put his hand on back.

“It’ll be alright Kath. We’ll figure it out.” Kathy leaned up and they both stood looking at poor old Grandfather who had always been so good and kind to them. Tears streamed down Kathy’s cheeks, and Keith took great gulps of air so that he would not join her in crying.

After a few minutes, Keith said, “Look, there is some more color in his face.”

“There is.” Kathy smiled, her cheeks tight from the dried tears. “Grandfather, are you awake? Grandfather, can you hear me?” She spoke quietly leaning forward.

Mrs. Parkins came in and pulled the children away from the bed. “What are you doing?” She spoke in a hard, quiet voice that was much worse than any sort of shouting. She held them tightly around the arms. “Your Grandfather is very, very ill. You mustn’t disturb him.” She pulled the children to the door and pushed them through, closing it behind them.

They shirked off to their bedroom talking of nothing but the newcomer until it was time for their afternoon chores. They were both convinced that something very wrong was happening.

As everyone seemed so taken with Rummy, they decided to approach some of the staff when he was not around to see if they still thought so well of him. A few days after his arrival, they decided to first talk to Fancie as, next to Mrs. Oddly, she was the senior most employee and had been a great friend of their mother. Besides, Mrs. Oddly never said a word to them besides giving them an order about their chores or squawking at them to not get underfoot.

Fancie, of course, was in the kitchen with her assistant, Sarah. Both were busy bustling around the kitchen. Seeing that they were there to talk, Fancie put a bowl of potatoes before them and got them set to peeling. "How is the Old Man today?"

"The same," said Keith weakly as he pulled a potato towards him. Kathy picked up a knife and quietly got to work.

"Cheer up young ones, the Old Man will come around. You'll see."

"You really think so, Fancie?" Kathy asked.

"I know so," she said soothingly, giving each of them a pat on the head.

"Of course he will," Sarah chimed in. "After all, that dear Mr. Rummy and lovely Mrs. Parkins are taking such good care of him."

Not even looking at one another, Keith and Kathy's mouths dropped open, knives halted mid-peel.

"So true," Fancie returned looking at Sarah, "That Mrs. Parkins knows a thing or two about healing people I would bet."

Fancie and Sarah fell into discussing how delighted they were with Uncle Rummy and Mrs. Parkins. They spoke about them with such wonderful expressions that Keith and Kathy could hardly believe that it was the same two people. They hurried to finish the peeling and made a furtive exit while the two ladies still carried on.

They next approached Mr. Wizener. Since he had shown reluctance to accept Uncle Rummy, they hoped he was not so far under the spell. They went out to the stables under the pretense of admiring Uncle Rummy's carriage. They saw Hans first, the stable boy. He was one of their regular playmates in the neighborhood and Hans and Keith fell into talking about the game of cawble ball that was being organized for the next Sunday. Kathy wandered past the boys and found Mr. Wizener at his desk in the back.

"Hello Mr. Wizener."

The old man craned his head around. "Well, hello my girl. What brings you out here today?"

"Keith and I wanted to look at the carriage up close. It looked so grand outside."

His withered old face lit up. "It is at that, dear girl. It is at that. With four matching horses to boot." He walked her back towards the boys. "Young Hans, you'll have plenty of time for ball talk come game time. Now back to work."

Hans smartly returned to his sweeping. Keith joined Kathy and Mr. Wizener as he unlocked the carriage barn. "Go on, have a look," he said, ushering the children into the large room. The late afternoon sun streaming through the windows lit up the carriage. Shiny blue with red trim and gilt edges, it looked like an otherworldly creature. Keith couldn't help but run a hand along the smooth laquer.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Mr. Wizener joined Keith. It was hard not to touch it as it gleamed so. Even Kathy, who had more interest in the horses, couldn't resist. As her hand floated along the side, she noticed that it didn't feel quite solid. Almost as if it was made from wood soaked in water. She and Keith had traveled opposite ways around the

grand thing and nearly collided, she was so lost in thought. What was it the material felt like? Keith gave her a look, one that must have mirrored her own. He felt it to. It was like they could see the carriage was there and feel it was there, but knew that it wasn't really. When they both turned to the carriage, shoulders touching, they could see underneath the beautiful veneer that the coach was just a banged up old wagon with a patchy cover.

Mr. Wizener had been talking the whole time about the grandness of it and how wonderful the horses were and how the driver was the most helpful boy he'd ever known. They didn't even have to ask whether or not he thought Uncle Rummy was a fraud. He was a total believer too and he couldn't tell that the coach was just a glamour.

After that, whenever they had a chance to speak to anyone alone, they tried to ask surreptitious questions about Uncle Rummy being a real Goodhost, but all they ever got was gushing responses about how good he was.

Keith and Kathy took to eavesdropping. They would be slow about their chores around his office or bedroom. Mrs. Parkins rarely said much to anyone, so she wasn't worth spying on. Not trusting either of them a whit, the children tried to avoid them as much as possible. But that proved to be hard, as Uncle Rummy insisted on having all his meals with the children in attendance. He would sit the main dining table and ask the kids about their day, their schoolwork, what their interests were. Keith and Kathy would answer dutifully, if somewhat sullenly. All the while the various kitchen and wait staff would listen in, with the occasional "bless his heart," or "isn't he a dear to those kids."

Keith and Kathy, always the darlings of the inn and tavern, were becoming less and less tolerated. Their sulking in corners, skiving off of duties, and general moodiness made everyone think they were acting spoiled. Although, Kathy was sure it was another spell from Uncle Rummy.

It got so bad that even Fancie, their dearest friend, gave them a talking to. "There is no reason to go on as such. We're all terribly sad about the Old Man, but you don't see me moping about in places I shouldn't be. Your Uncle Rummy is doing right by you. You should be kinder to him."

After that they did their best to appear cheerful, even if they didn't feel it. They didn't want to lose all their allies. Instead, they taught themselves new spells. They had some natural magic, all Goodhosts did. But it was a simple kind of magic useful for running the inn, but not much else. Kathy and Keith, in their desperation, taught themselves how to listen through a door from many feet away. They learned out how to walk on air so that no one could hear them coming or going. Keith even managed to fade into a shadowy corner, but Kathy never quite got the hang of that one.

About that time, school was let out for the summer holidays, so the children had many more opportunities to snoop. One morning, just after the holidays began, they had been cleaning the upstairs parlor for Mrs. Oddly. As they passed Grandfather's room they heard Uncle Rummy's voice roar through the door. "...Constantly underfoot. How am..."

With the barest of glances, they agreed to listen. They crept towards the door, but couldn't hear as Uncle Rummy and Mrs. Parkins were now whispering. Not wanting to miss the conversation, Kathy concentrated for a minute then put her hands over Keith's ears and pulled out, trailing his hearing to the crack under the door. Then she did it for herself.

"We can't send them away," it was Mrs. Parkins speaking. "What if we sent them to their father and they told everybody about their Uncle Rummy's mysterious behavior?"

"I know, I know," that was Uncle Rummy sounding resigned, "I just can't understand why the enchantment won't take. The rest of the town thinks I'm some sort of benighted saint." Keith and Kathy could almost picture his smug smile.

“You tried it with dragon’s blood?”

“Yes! That’s the thing. I thought for certain it took then, but not five minutes later they were suspicious again.” The room fell quiet for a short time, the children held their breath, even though they were five feet along the hallway and didn’t think Uncle Rummy could hear through walls.

“What about this? What if we have them spend an hour or two in here every afternoon, say to relieve you. Then we can both. . .” Just then someone tripped on the stairs. Keith and Kathy grabbed hands and sailed along the corridor and round a corner. They lurked for a few minutes to compose themselves, but they missed the end of what Uncle Rummy had been saying.

When next they ventured by the door, they felt a new magic on it that seemed to seal all sound inside.

Their daily routine now included a two hour visit with Grandfather. It was not lost on them that the time they were confined to the room was the same time that Fancie and her assistant took their afternoon breaks and Mrs. Oddly napped. Even though they knew Uncle Rummy was up to no good during that time, they didn’t mind so much as it gave them a quiet opportunity to talk. They used the silencing ward that Rummy had left on the door so that no one could hear them.

Whoever had tripped on the stairs had given them a good idea for a signal warning. They charmed the second to last step at the top to buck whomever was coming up the steps, just enough to make them stumble. Hearing a person stumble was their cue to remove the silencing ward and appear quiet and dutiful.

Over the next few weeks they made many plans and put them into practice but they never learned anything more about what Uncle Rummy was up to. Grandfather’s condition never changed.

As time went on, their plans were becoming more and more desperate, as, by this time, everyone seemed to have forgotten that Grandfather was the true manager of the inn. The only thing people seemed to notice was that the beer wasn’t quite up to its usual snuff. Of course, Keith and Kathy were blamed for the decline in the taste of the beer. While no one came out right and said it, they knew the looks and whispers that were dooming them to be disappointments, like their father.

Disheartened, it became a chore to even pretend to be cheerfully normal. They moped about their daily duties and were beginning to resign themselves to the idea that they were the only two people who knew that Uncle Rummy was up to no good.

The summer holidays were a busy time at the inn, not least of which was because the early hops and barley was starting to come in. This meant Keith and Kathy had to spend a great deal of time in the brewing room since Grandfather was not able to help at all that year with the brewing. It was hot and hard work even with the spells that turned the roasting barley and kept the fire going steady. Uncle Rummy, the false Goodhost, helped not at all.

One of the first changes that Uncle Rummy had made upon his arrival was to lock the door to the brewing room and keep the key. The door had always had a key in its lock as it was understood only those of the family were allowed in on the secrets, but Uncle Rummy had tsk tsked at the idea of leaving the door unlatched and had only opened the door during the hours that the children were meant to be doing their chores. But now that Keith and Kathy were well into brewing season, and needing in the room at all hours, he couldn’t be bothered to let them in, so the door wound up staying unlatched.

One morning, the twins rose before dawn to check on the fermentation of a particularly delicate brew and found Uncle Rummy at the base of the stairs looking red faced and cross.

“You shouldn’t surprise me like that, old chap that I am,” he said too heartily and with too much effort.

“Sorry Uncle,” they said in unison. Keith went on, “We’ve got to manage the ale this morning. It was fuzzing wrong last night and we have to make sure the spell kept hold.” He and Kathy passed by the big man, going to the barrels straight away.

“Hmph, good. Got to get it just right, haven’t we,” said Uncle Rummy as he went up the stairs.

Neither of them said a word about finding him in the brewery at dawn, not while they did their work. It was bad enough that a stranger was in the brewing room startling all the quieting spells. They didn’t want to add to it by releasing their own worries. Plus, they weren’t convinced Rummy didn’t have listening spells of his own set to work there. They would talk about it in the afternoon when they had their hour at Grandfather’s bedside.

As they were leaving to get breakfast, Kathy gasped and stopped Keith by the sleeve. She pointed into the tunnel. Just visible in the gloom, a few feet in, were a number of boxes piled higgledy-piggledy. As no one was supposed to go into the tunnel, except of course the imps, this was a terrible sacrilege. Keith, eyes round, made to go in and look at the stack, but Kathy held him back. They went upstairs silently.

Over breakfast at the main dining table with Uncle Rummy, Kathy had time to consider what they had seen. They both thought, from the very first, that Uncle Rummy wanted something. He drank the family beer with enthusiasm, but he didn’t seem to want to take it. He certainly had no interest in learning the recipes or spells. There was really nothing else to take, since the inn was rooted in the ground. They had considered that maybe he wanted to steal from the guests, but he had little to do with any of them outside of meal hours.

Keith had suggested that he was hiding out, but if that were the case he wouldn’t walk around town so openly. Nor go away for a whole day once a week on “personal business.” Kathy began to think that whatever Uncle Rummy was doing there, it had something to do with the tunnel.

The boxes in the tunnel were much on their mind all day. When they did their work in the brewery later that morning they could hardly take their eyes off the mysterious shapes in the darkness.

When they arrived for their sitting time with Grandfather, each was about burst at the seams, they wanted so badly to talk about it. Once Mrs. Parkins had left, Keith got up to ward the door. “I forgot to set the charm on the stairs,” he said as he rushed out the door. Kathy crossed her arms and fumed to be put off for even another second.

At the top of the stairs, Keith bent to work the charm. He could just see the landing of the ground floor, the landing that opened onto the kitchen, with a door to the pantry, a door to Grandfather’s office, and, at the end, the door to the brewing cellar. He heard the quiet voices of Uncle Rummy and Mrs. Parkins and their heavy footfalls. He caught a glimpse of trousered legs and the bottom of a full skirt going towards the cellar stairway.

He was shocked and alarmed and wanted to follow. Especially when he heard the familiar squeak that the cellar door made as it shut. Confused and angry, he stalked back to Grandfather’s room and threw the silencing ward around the door.

“He’s taken her to the brewing room!” Keith announced, folding his arms across his chest as Kathy loosened hers in astonishment.

“No!” she gasped. “How could he?” She was on her feet now too.

“Because he’s not a Goodhost, that’s why.” They both looked at their grand dad peaceful on his bed, looking for all the world as if he was just asleep.

“Keith, I think we must explore the tunnel. Whatever Rummy is up to, it has to do with the tunnel, I’m sure of it.”

Keith sat down heavily. "I think you're right. But we're not supposed to," he said weakly. He had always had an itch to explore the tunnel, but all the stories and dire warnings had done their work to make him very afraid of it.

That went double for Kathy who had no interest at all in seeing what was down at the other end. "Yes, but we aren't supposed to let anyone but Goodhosts down the cellar. We've already failed. We should try to fix it."

Keith nodded and muttered, "And we're getting blamed for the beer being off."

Kathy thought of the ghost that her father had told them lives in the tunnel. He told them, when they were very young, before he had left, that as a boy he had tried to explore the tunnel, but was turned back only a dozen feet in by the scariest ghost they could imagine. She knew it was likely just a story to scare them off.

They made their plans for exploring the tunnel over the next half hour, when Keith came up with a very good idea. "Kathy," he started, sitting up a little bit straighter, "We should set listening spells in here and in the brewing room."

She thought for a moment, "Yes, but it would have to be a different spell than the one we use for overhearing. We couldn't dangle our hearing in one place and then walk all over. It would get wrapped around things."

"What if we somehow left a bit of our hearing in something?" Kathy raised an eyebrow, a bit skeptical. "No listen. You know how we make our hearing long? We could take a bit off that and stick it somewhere."

"OK," Kathy got up and looked around the room. "What about Grandmother's portrait?"

"Perfect. It looks like her eyes follow you anyway."

Kathy walked up close to the painting of the grandmother they never knew. She extended her hearing away from her head and, after some consideration, pinched a bit off and cupped it in her hand. There was nothing to see, but Kathy concentrated hard at it. After a bit, she stuck out her hand and pushed it against the picture. Removing her hand, she nodded to it and turned back to her brother. "We should test it. Take down the ward and I'll go into the hall."

Keith did as he was told. As soon as his sister was out of the door, he warded it again. With a mischievous smile, he went to Grandfather's bedside. "One time Kathy snuck down to the brewing room at night to try to see an imp. Instead she drank a whole pint of..."

Kathy burst through the door, "Don't you dare!"

Keith laughed at her, "It isn't as if he could hear me."

"You don't know that," she pouted, crossing her arms. "At least I know it works." They heard a stumble on the stairs and quickly took their usual seats.

"Blast that step," Mrs. Parkins muttered as she came into the room. "Have you two had a nice visit with your grandfather then?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parkins," they said in unison with sing-song voices. She let them go.

They put the first step of their plan into action at dinner. While everyone was either eating or busy with guests, Keith excused himself. When he got to the kitchen, he used his slinking into shadows spell and went out to the stables unnoticed. Hans was sitting outside the double doors on a tall stool. Mr. Wizener never left the stables alone and he was eating dinner inside with the staff. Carefully, Keith snuck through the open door, knowing that he was not invisible, just not very noticeable. Inside he took the longest rope he could find, pulled it over his shoulder and snuck back out.

The cellar had pulley system with a large docking box that came up to the side of the inn, right next to the stables. It was used to take all the boxes and sack of ingredients for the beer down to the cellar without someone carrying each bit. The loading box came up between the kitchen and the stables, so delivery men could pull up their carts right to the door. Keith placed the long rope into the loading bay and snuck back inside.

After dinner they had done their final check in the brewery and Keith had left a bit of his hearing along a carved portion of the lintel around the door to the tunnel. He put it into a carved horn of plenty with lots of fruits and vegetables spilling from it. It seemed the most appropriate spot.

They brought down the loading box, both of them pulling it down as quietly as they could and then hid the rope underneath the heavy bags of grain.

On the way to bed, Keith thought he'd be a show off and put another bit of hearing in the short hall near the kitchen. This time, taking a bit from his left ear, as he had put a bit from his right ear into the lintel below, he stuck it to a dingy old painting of the moors outside Heath Corning.

"You'll get an earful with that one," Kathy warned. "You'll hear everything in the kitchen." As it was, she was already getting tired of her double hearing and very little noise was made in Grandfather's room.

Keith only grinned at her and followed her upstairs to bed.

He woke sometime later, sitting bolt upright in bed, letting out a squeak of fright. This woke Kathy too, who hastily looked around their dark room, trying to see what spooked her brother.

After a second, Keith let out a deep breath. "It's nothing. Only some imps in the brewing room." He laid back down. "At first it sounded like something was in here." They went back to sleep, Kathy feeling she got the best of the bargain since Grandfather's room was completely silent.

Keith slept terribly, what with the cackles and slurping of the imps enjoying their illicit beverages, and was woken well before dawn when Sarah arrived in the kitchen to start the days workings. She sang softly to herself as she banged around the kitchen. That was too much for Keith to ignore and he could sleep no more.

At breakfast, Uncle Rummy announced that he would be away all day for his business. The staff made a sound of disappointment, but Keith and Kathy tried to keep their faces stoic in spite of their delight. Although it was easier for Keith since he felt he was likely to fall asleep with his face in his porridge. This would be a boon to their plan.

The Rummy's carriage drew up after breakfast, while the children were still at their after breakfast chores. Uncle Rummy climbed in heavily and the dough faced driver drove off. Finishing their upstairs chores as fast as they could, the told Mrs. Oddly they had to finish off a big batch in the brewery and would be in the cellar all morning. The old housekeeper didn't even have time to reply before they had rushed downstairs.

They didn't have very much work to do in the brewery that morning, but they got started on it anyway, both of them nervous to take the next step in their plan. Kathy screwed up her gumption and fetched the rope from its hiding place.

"Its best to get on with it," she said grimly.

"Easy for you to say, you don't have to do it yourself," Keith replied with alarm.

"You've always wondered what was in the tunnel, now you can find out," Kathy said petulantly. She took one end of the rope and began to tie it to a hook just inside the lintel. Keith took the other end and was about to tie it to his waist when he stopped, cocked his head to the right, and looked up the stairs.

“Quick, he’s back and coming down here.” They sprang into action. Kathy scooped the bulk of the rope and followed Keith as he threw his end behind a big cask. Kathy threw the coils and both of them pushed and shoved to get it out of sight. Kathy, already kneeling, turned and pretended to be sweeping the hearth. Keith ran to the kettle where a fresh batch was fermenting and pretended to be making spells over it.

As Uncle Rummy came down the stairs, both of their hearts were pounding and they struggled to remain composed, yet show surprise at the large man’s entrance.

“Hello again my dears,” Uncle Rummy said in his most jovial of voices.

“Hello Uncle,” they returned, hardly looking up from their pretend chores.

“I, well, I forgot something,” he said with his big voice, but there was a bit of confusion in it this time. He umm’d and ehh’d to stall for time, both children turning now to watch him. Then he seemed to think of what he forgot and he said, “I need to take a small cask of beer to my business associate. Pour it for me.”

Like marionettes, Keith and Kathy dropped what they were doing and marched to the nearest ready barrel. Kathy had a face of willful determination as she tried, but failed, to counteract the commanding spell that had taken her over. Keith was too scared by his body acting without his consent to try and break the spelled command.

Kathy took a small travel cask and knelt before the tap, while Keith opened it. Both of them automatically delivering the spells required for taking the beer. When the cask was filled and the command was wearing off, they turned back to Uncle Rummy to find him waiting and smiling. He now held a fat valise under his arm.

“Very good, very good. Please be so kind as to carry that up for me.” He turned and went up the stairs, the children following carrying the slight cask between them.

After handing the cask to Uncle Rummy’s plain faced driver, they waved the false carriage off. Determinedly they marched back through the kitchen, ignoring Fancie’s questions, and went back down stairs as if they were under another marching order.

Once downstairs again, they collapsed onto a bench, out of breath and very cross.

“Gads, that was horrible,” Keith panted. “Much worse than that first day.”

“He put a misdirection spell into it too, so we couldn’t look around.” Kathy rubbed her neck. “That valise must have been in the tunnel. Oh, I wish he hadn’t come back for it so we could have found it.”

Even after they had calmed down they sat on the bench, both of them too nervous still to attempt exploring the tunnel. They both half expected Uncle Rummy to come bursting in on them again.

After a while, Kathy cocked her head in a listening position. “Mrs. Parkins is in with Grandfather. How can you stand listening in on the kitchen the whole time? Just her puttering is driving me bonkers.”

Keith shrugged, “It’s not so bad anymore. It was hard to take this morning because I couldn’t sleep,” he punctuated this with a yawn. “But it is kind of reassuring listening to Fancie and Sarah go about their work. People keep stopping in to talk. It makes me feel as if things are normal.”

“Still,” he continued after a pause, “I wouldn’t mind it if we could think of a way to turn it off at night.” He yawned again.

Kathy had stopped attending him, concentrating on Mrs. Parkins in the room two floors above them. She heard the clinking of covered dishes and the tinkling of glass. What could she be doing, thought Kathy, taking a late breakfast in Grandfather’s room?”

Listening with all her might, she heard the muffled gurgle of a masculine voice. She jumped up. “Time for some food and water, Master Innkeeper,” she heard Mrs. Parkins say. There was more muffled sounds, perhaps of someone eating, and the clinking of a spoon on porcelain. This went on for a few minutes.

“Oh, I wish I could see too,” Kathy mumbled to herself. Keith watched his sister open mouthed, waiting for her to explain what she was hearing.

More dish moving sounds and then the settling of a heavy tray. Kathy heard Mrs. Parkins say, “Now time for your medicine silly man.” Then the murmuring of the second voice in the room became clear, “Up, must . . . up.”

It was Grandfather’s voice, Kathy was certain. Her eyes welled with tears, her hands balled into fists, but she was still listening, “Drink up your medicine old man, time for more sleep.”

Grandfather murmured a no sound, but Mrs. Parkins must have overpowered him, for she heard a slurp and then nothing more but Mrs. Parkins moving about the room.

Keith was at Kathy’s side by that time, he held her arms and tried to get her to look him in the face. “Tell me, tell me what’s happening.”

Kathy finally looked up, “They are keeping Grandfather asleep. I heard him just now. I heard him trying to wake up, but Mrs. Parkins made him take a medicine.”

Keith was stunned. “What? How could they? Are you sure? How?” He slumped back down on the bench putting his head in his hands. “Why would they do that to a harmless old man?”

Kathy’s fists were still clinched, but her eyes were dry. “We’re going to find out right now.” She marched over to the rope and pulled it out, nearly knocking herself silly when one end became unstuck. Pulling the rope behind her she wrapped one end around her brother’s waist and tied a secure knot. “Go on.” She nudged him forward.

His fear of his sister’s temper, for the moment, outweighed his fear of the tunnel and he took a few confident strides in. Once he was past the light, his steps faltered and he stopped. “Have you tied the rope?” He looked back and saw Kathy give the rope a yank, showing it to be secure against the wall.

Keith looked around, peering into the deep dark in front of him. “Maybe I should take a lantern.”

“I wondered when you’d think of that,” Kathy said. Keith came and meet her at the doorway, taking the light without comment. If he blustered now, they both knew it was to cover his fear. Looking at the lintel that framed the doorway, he saw that the tunnel was much wider than it looked from inside the cellar. He had always considered the tunnel tall and narrow, but in fact, it was wide and shallow. The walls were all of jagged stone and earth. The floor was rocky with the barest hints of a trail meandering among the various sized stones.

With another backward glance at this sister, he stepped out and carefully followed the trail amongst the rubble. Nearly thirty feet in, just when the light to the cellar was starting to seem rather far away, he found a barrier. It was like black cloth that stretched flat from wall to wall. Even when he held the lantern light right up, it remained dense black, sucking in the light. Keith poked at it with a finger and found, much to his alarm, that his hand went right through it. He stumbled back a bit.

“What’s wrong?” Kathy called. She could tell he was stalled at something, but it was too dark for her to see clearly.

“It’s like a cloud, a vast black cloud,” he called back.

“Try and walk through it,” Kathy shouted.

“Easy for you to say.” He considered it further then put his arm through and brought it back out. He examined it with the lantern light. It looked perfectly fine and he felt no difference. “I’m going through.”

Cautiously, he stepped into the darkness. He closed his eye and took another step, then another, and then a fourth step. He opened his eyes a crack. The blanketing darkness was gone. He was still in a tunnel, but it was a different tunnel. The rocks lining the walls were dark and less jagged, and the floor of the tunnel was quite clear of any rubble. The air even felt different. It didn’t smell of dry earth and rocks. It was warmer and had the hint of vegetation to it.

Keith could see a light down the way. It was downhill he saw and the light was bright enough that he didn’t need the lantern. He closed the slats on his lantern, darkening it, and cautiously moved forward.

The light, he soon realized, was daylight. And before long, he neared the end of the tunnel, which turned out to be a cave of some sort. From just behind the entrance, he could see a clearing of bare earth surround by the most lavish foliage he had never imagined. If the differences in the tunnels didn’t tell him he was in another world, the landscape before him certainly would.

Gone was the gently rolling, heath land that he knew so well. Before him were tall, thick trees with ferns dangling off the lower limbs he could see. The ground was covered in bright green plants and shrubs. The air was thick with birdsong and wet. Water droplets seemed to fall continuously among the plants, but he could see no sign of rain on the empty dirt of the clearing. The sun was certainly bright enough to tell there were no rain clouds above. But then, he thought, stepping deeper into the cave, he had no idea whether this place had a sun or not.

Keith decided this was too much for him alone and hastily made his way back to the comfort of his own cellar. So nervous was he by what he had seen that he went through the black barrier without even thinking twice. He sort of half noticed that it was not deep at all, only a few inches.

“Kathy,” he called, opening the slats on the lantern. “Come on, you must see this.”

Kathy hesitated in the doorway, she looked behind her, then stepped gingerly into the tunnel, loosely holding the rope as a guide. Keith walked in to meet her halfway. Taking her hand he led her back.

“What did you find?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“You’ll see. It’s not far.”

He led her straight through the black barrier without thinking. Kathy pulled back from it, wary to go through. If Keith hadn’t been holding her hand tightly, she would have stopped right there. With a squeak of protest, Kathy followed him through, he face screwed up. “It’s alright here, open your eyes.”

Kathy did and blinked with astonishment at the difference in the tunnel. Keith shut up the lantern and walked on. Kathy staying close by his side. At the entrance to the cave, she balked at the new scene before her. “How could this be here? We should be looking out at Hawthorne Hill. Where are we?”

“A different world, I suppose. This is nowhere near Heath Corning, that is certain.”

Kathy edged to the very entrance and craned her neck around the side. “My, it is a pretty place with such lovely, large flowers.”

There was a tall bush just to the side of the entrance which had violet and white blossoms as big as her hand. Kathy couldn’t resist taking that extra step in order to smell them. Keith tried to hold her back, but couldn’t get a grip on her, the rope around his waist pulled tight. He undid the knot and let the rope fall to the ground, but didn’t go much farther into the clearing.

The flowers smelled divine. Next to that bush was a low shrub that had crimson buds, so she stepped over to it. However, in doing so, she found a large stack of crates piled behind it. They were made of a wood she didn't recognize. It was nearly white with dark black streaks and very spongy looking. Stamped on each crate in bright red in a type of writing that looked foreign were the words Caution and Do Not Open.

Kathy waved Keith over. He was still hesitant to leave the cover of the cave, but after a thoroughly look around, he went to his sister. "These look like the same sized boxes that were in the tunnel yesterday."

"Do you think that Uncle Rummy is smuggling these into our world?"

"I'm sure of it," Kathy said looking around nervously. "Keith, we have to tell somebody. Somebody who will listen to us."

Keith was about to respond, when Kathy held up her hand. They both heard the heavy clomp of a man's footsteps. Then they heard a second pair. They scurried into the cave.

"I know I heard something. Sounded like little kids," said the high thin voice of a man.

"It's them imps, I tell you." This voice was deeper and seemed to match the thump, thump of heavy boot falls.

Kathy took up the rope and Keith took the lantern and they ran for the black barrier with all their might. Keith sailed through without looking back. Kathy stopped and looked. No one was in the entrance, no one had seen them, but she could see they left their children-sized footprints up and down the way. She pulled up the remaining rope, took a deep breath and blew out a magic breeze that sifted the dirt of the floor, removing any evidence they had been there.

She dodged through the barrier, eyes shut tight and holding her breath. Keith was waiting on the other side. He opened the lantern and they made their way back to the cellar, Kathy rolling up the rope as they went.

They spent the rest of the morning sitting just inside the tunnel, they didn't want to upset the beer in the cellar with their worry, trying to decide what they should do.

"Just think," Keith kept going on. "All this time there was a whole different world right down there." He pointed towards the barrier.

"It is strange," Kathy said in her most practical manner, "But we have a much bigger problem to work out." They knew they must tell someone, but there was no one in town who was not charmed by Uncle Rummy.

"What about sending a letter to father," Keith suggested. Though he knew it was a silly idea even before Kathy could shoot it down.

"Father would come here and fall under the spell too. Even if he believed us," she added in a small voice. They both looked at the rocky dirt floor. Then Kathy looked up, "I know. Let's right to the Wizard Howl. He is a royal wizard after all."

Keith rolled his eyes. His sister was mad about the Wizard Howl since they had started hearing stories about his escapades years before. "There are two royal wizards you know. Wizard Suliman is the head wizard. If we write to anybody, it should be him."

"Everyone knows that Wizard Howl is far more powerful. It would be just like him to come to try and rescue us. Old Wizard Suliman would likely send an agent and not even come himself."

"Wait a second," Keith jumped up. He clasped his hands behind his back and paced back-and-forth a few times, thinking hard. To Kathy, he looked very much like Grandfather when he did that. "What about the Chrestomanci? Let's call him."

“You don’t know if he really even exists,” Kathy said.

“But he does. I know it.” Keith had read about a powerful enchanter called Chrestomanci in a book about famous wizards from across all worlds. Keith had read the chapter aloud to Kathy, but she was never so taken with him as Keith had been. “All we have to do is call his name three times and ask for help.”

“How do you know he’ll even come. It’s not like he exists in this world.”

“But that’s his job. He must come,” Keith returned.

“I think we should write to Wizard Howl. We know he exists and that he . . .” Kathy was about to say “likes to rescue maidens” but Keith would have teased her mercilessly if she had. He didn’t notice that she hadn’t completed her sentence.

“I admit that Wizard Howl must be one of the most powerful wizards in our world, but Chrestomanci is a nine-life enchanter. There can be no one more magical than that. What if Howl comes here and he falls under Uncle Rummy’s charm. I’m sure it wouldn’t happen to ... the other one.” Keith was a little frightened to say the name lest he call him unintentionally.

It was nearing lunchtime and they had to go back upstairs. They put everything in order so that neither Uncle Rummy nor Mrs. Parkins, if she came down again, would notice they had been in the tunnel.

Their argument continued over the next day, in fits and bursts, as they were eager that no one know that they were arguing at all. They also did some snooping and found that when Uncle Rummy returned in his fancy carriage, the inside was packed with boxes. Boxes that were not unloaded but left inside the carriage. Keith was woken up that night with the sound of movement in the cellar. Uncle Rummy and Mrs. Parkins were unloading boxes from the loading elevator.

A day later, when they were spending their afternoon time at Grandfather’s beside, the argument grew to a fever pitch. Sitting silently by their grand dad’s beside, each of them wanting to do the right thing and both of them so frightened of getting it wrong.

“Keith, I’m going to write to the Wizard Howl tonight. I can’t wait anymore.”

“I’m still going to call on the other one.” Keith responded, arms folded across his chest. “I will. The next time Rummy is gone for the day. That’s when I’ll do it.”

Kathy was about to say something mean, when Keith held up his hand to silence her. “They’re in the cellar.” He cocked his head listening. “It’s Rummy and Parkins. They’re waiting for somebody to come through the tunnel. They’ve brought boxes with them. From the carriage?”

“It is smuggling. I knew it.” Keith nodded at her.

Once Mrs. Parkins had returned, stumbling up the top stairs and cursing as she entered the room, Kathy had begged off her chores and went to write to the Wizard Howl. She rewrote her letter many times and worked on it well into the night, but she wanted to get it just right.

In the morning, she left Keith, bleary-eyed from another night of constantly interrupted sleep, to post her letter.

From that day forward, they waited. They waited and listened. Uncle Rummy, either in the privacy of Grandfather’s bedroom or in the cellar, inadvertently told them more and more about his operations, but he also said things that frightened the children. He said such things as “getting rid of the old man” or “destroying the tunnel

and the brewery.” Each new revelation brought a new wave of alarm. The problem, though, was that he sounded peevisish when he said such things and they didn’t know if he was speaking out or making plans. After all, they had only been listening in for a few days. Who knew what he had said before they started listening.

They waited for four more days, until Uncle Rummy got in his carriage one morning and promised to be back by dinner time. Keith and Kathy were nearly trembling with nerves and anticipation. Keith would call to Chrestomanci that afternoon.

They had a long, whispered discussions all morning about where it should be done. They had already decided they would do it after lunch time and before they were supposed to have their afternoon visit with Grandfather. The inn was very quiet then and much of the staff would be helping in the kitchen to clean dishes and starting with the preparation for dinner. Keith had originally wanted to call for him in the cellar, but Kathy was adamant that they not bring a stranger directly into their family secrets.

“Besides,” she added, “What if it’s not him who comes, but someone or something else? We should take that precaution at least.”

On thinking about it, Keith agreed, but not for the same reason. He thought that having a stranger enter the inn, their home, that it would be best for him to come into one of the great rooms. They were not called Goodhost for nothing. The entry room was off limits, for Mrs. Oddly was never far away. They decided on the dining room, as, once it was cleaned and polished after lunch, no one would be in there for hours.

After helping clear the tables in the room and taking responsibility for sweeping the floors and wiping the tables and chairs that day, Keith and Kathy had the room to themselves. They hurriedly, but thoroughly, did their work. In not much time at all, they found themselves ready to try their luck.

Keith was tongue-tied. Now that it came down to it, he was too nervous to say the name. What if he came and was mad at them for calling? Kathy nudged him with her elbow. “Do it. Do it now if you’re going to.”

If for no reason other than he did not want to spend his life being teased by his sister, he said, “Chrestomanci, Chrestomanci, Chrestomanci. We need your help.”

They waited. Only a moment or two passed before a tall, dark-haired man came through the door from the entry hall. Keith and Kathy were at first alarmed, thinking one of the staff was coming in, but their alarm quickly turned into surprise.

The tall, dark haired man was wearing a dressing jacket of a rich green velvet, it was trimmed with black satin and embroidered all over with small colorful dragons. He held a letter in his hand but was looking off in a vague way.

“Mr. Chrestomanci, sir?” Keith asked, bring the man’s eyes towards them, but not, apparently, his attention.

“No, my name is Christopher Chant,” Keith looked crestfallen. “My title is Chrestomanci.” Keith’s eyes glowed. As did Kathy’s. This tall, dark stranger in beautiful clothes was wonderfully romantic looking.

“Mr. Chant, sir” Keith tried again, “We very much need your help.”

“Is that so,” Chrestomanci said, looking down at a bit of fuzz on his sleeve. He absently brushed it away. “Cat got up the chimney or some such thing?”

“Well, no, sir,” Kathy answered. “You see, a man claiming to be our uncle has put our grandfather into a magicked sleep and is using the tunnel in our cellar to smuggle boxes from another world.”

Chrestomanci’s attention suddenly focused, but not on the children. “Has the whole town charmed has he?”

Kathy was agog, “Yes, we think so.”

“Hmm, is there some where else we can discuss this? There are listening spells in this room.”

“Yes, sir,” said Keith. He looked at his sister, “The cellar?” She nodded. “Come this way, please sir, if you don’t mind.”

As Keith ushered Chrestomanci towards the door to the hall, Kathy went ahead. She crept along the passage and when she got to the where the hall opened on the kitchen, she peered around. Everyone was busy working and would likely take no notice of them passing by. The only person that would see them was Sarah who faced the doorway, using the cutting board. When Keith and Chrestomanci were right behind her, she worked a bit of magic on Sarah so that the fat carrot she was cutting slipped off the board and landed on the floor.

“Drat” mumbled Sarah as she bent to get it. Keith, Kathy, and Chrestomanci all hurried past the opening and down the stairs to the cellar.

Keith offered Chrestomanci a seat on the bench, while Kathy poured a mug of ale for him. When she handed it to him, he said, “You really are very polite.” He tasted the ale. “And this is marvelous.”

“Thank you sir,” said Kathy. Keith went further, “It’s in our name, sir.”

“And what are you called then?” Chrestomanci said leaning against the wall and enjoying another taste of beer.

“Goodhost, sir.” Keith nudged Kathy with his elbow. “She’s Kathy and I’m Keith Goodhost.”

“Well you certainly live up to your name. Now, tell me what is going on here. I feel a lot of different magic and another world pressing in close.”

“Yes, sir. It’s down that tunnel just there.” Keith pointed. Chrestomanci craned his neck to look down it. “Only we didn’t know where it lead until a few days ago.”

“Once we discovered that that Rummy fellow was putting boxes in there,” added Kathy.

“I believe you are starting at the end. Why don’t you start from the beginning?” Chrestomanci said, really settling in. He had been urgently called by many people and to many worlds, but never been offered such hospitality. He looked off to a corner of the room while they explained.

“It started some months ago when Grandfather suddenly became ill with a sleeping sickness,” Kathy began. The two of them explained what had been happening, with many asides and several indirect questions by Chrestomanci who looked as if he wasn’t really listening. When they got to the part when they decided to call to him, Kathy conveniently left out the bit about writing to the Wizard Howl.

When they pointed out where Keith had left a bit of his hearing, Chrestomanci turned to look, “Very interesting. I would never have known it was there without you pointing it out. You know,” he said turning back to face the children, “by doing the spell that way, you don’t leave a trace as you would a proper spell. I think this Rummy person would have noticed straightaway if you had.”

They both blushed and looked away, “Well, you see, sir, we aren’t that good at magic,” said Keith.

“We’ve got the family talents, mostly used in the way of brewing of beer and makings things taste delicious,” added Kathy thinking of her father, “But that’s really as far as it goes.”

“Nonsense, individually you are both quite strong in magic.”

Standing a little apart, Keith and Kathy glanced at each other wide eyed. “You think so, sir?” Keith asked.

“Here, let’s do a little test.” Chrestomanci looked at them funny, then each of them took on a light golden glow. “See, that is your magic. Now please grasp hands.”

Once Kathy took Keith's hand, the light sparkled and grew until they had to shut their eyes a bit in order to not be blinded.

"I thought as much," Chrestomanci said, shading his eyes. "Twins who have magical abilities often have a different sort of magic when they use it together." He waved his hand and the light disappeared. Keith and Kathy stood blinking in the sudden dimness, still holding hands. "You both are quite strong magically on your own, but together your magic is tenfold. Enchanter standard, I'd say."

The children were too surprised to answer. Chrestomanci got up and returned his now empty mug to the wash-up stand. He looked in the direction of Grandfather's room. "I think together you could easily break the spell holding your grandfather. I think you could also, quite easily, overpower that Mrs. Parkins and that Rummy fellow." He smoothed out his trousers and pulled out the arms of his beautiful jacket. "But I need to catch this fellow and his compatriots. This is a flagrant misuse of magic."

He walked towards the tunnel and stood in the entrance looking as if he was thinking of his dinner. "Series five, I think. One of the tropical worlds." He turned back to them, taking a step forward. "I know it's hard, but I need you to not do anything. My staff will get to work on this immediately. I am certain we can catch this fellow and his cohorts and return your grandfather to health."

Keith and Kathy were stricken that he was leaving, but didn't know what else to do. Still holding hands, they nodded to him. "We will sir," said Kathy. Keith added, "Thank you sir."

Giving only a vague nod of acknowledgment, Chrestomanci turned into the tunnel. A small witch fire appeared above his hand and showed his passage until he passed through the black barrier.

"Back to waiting," said Keith. Kathy sighed.

Their afternoon visit with Grandfather was relieved early by Mrs. Parkins. She must have had nothing to do as Uncle Rummy was still away. Keith and Kathy had talked of nothing but Chrestomanci and were so engrossed they almost didn't hear Mrs. Parkins trip at the top of the stairs. Hastily undoing the silencing wards, Keith jumped over to Grandfather's bedside just as she came in.

"Someone really ought to do something about that stair. At least once every day I nearly break my head on it," Mrs. Parkins said peevishly. "Now, you two be on your way. I'm certain that Mrs. Fancie has something for you to do."

With a wary glance at each other, they said, "Yes, ma'am," and left the room. They went down to the kitchen and Fancie put them to work washing pots and pans.

"You two haven't had a chance for much fun this summer." Fancie said absently while stirring a great big pot over the hearth.

"Not really," said Keith. Kathy just pinched her face up and didn't answer.

"Well, I'm sure the old man will be grateful to you when he's all better. You'll get some holiday yet, I bet you."

Sarah came in the back door then carrying a large sack of flour. A bit out of breath she said, "A customer just came in the front. You ought to see him. He's dressed like a prince and ever so handsome."

Keith and Kathy stopped, looking at each other. "Is he back?" Kathy whispered, but Keith only shook his head.

Fancie looked through the window of the door that led to the dining room which let out onto the entry way. "Would you look at that coat. Mighty flashy, it is." Mrs. Fancie saw Fancie looking, as she seated the stranger in the dining room, and motioned that the guest was here to eat.

“Keith and Kathy darlings, would you take care of this gentleman? He looks to be wanting refreshments and Lucy isn’t back yet to wait on him.”

Keith and Kathy dried their hands and went to put on clean serving aprons. “Get him a beer while you’re at it. I’m sure he’s thirsty on a hot day like this.”

Kathy fetched the serving tray while Keith went into the taproom and pulled an ale. He held the door for Kathy while she carried the tray.

“Good afternoon, sir. Here is an ale for you. Made on the premises.” She sat the beer in front of him and took a step away. He made quite a striking picture, with flowing blonde hair, of an unusual color, a suit made of blue and gold.

“Good afternoon to you. I suspect you are my correspondent Kathy,” he said with a dazzling smile. He sipped the ale. Surprised, he held the glass out at full length to get a good look at it. “This is very good beer. You weren’t just saying so.”

Kathy, for the second time that day, stood with her mouth hanging open, completely shocked. Keith, while very impressed, remembered his duty, “Yes, of course, sir. We are known as brewers of the very best beers and ales. It is not something to make jokes of.”

The Wizard Howl, for that must be who was sitting before them, turned his dazzling smile on Keith. “Yes my good lad, I see that now. Why don’t you two have a seat and you can tell me everything.”

Keith and Kathy exchanged worried glances. “Sir, we aren’t allowed to sit with guests when we are serving,” said Kathy.

“Then stop serving,” Howl said simply, taking another swallow of beer. “I really must bring a cask of this to the rugby club reunion. The old fellows won’t know what to think.”

Seeing that Howl expected them to join him, the children removed their aprons and sat down at the table. “Now then,” he said companionably, “Kathy told me quite a lot in her letter.”

“Please, sir, we believe there are listening spells in this room,” Keith interjected.

“So there are, but they aren’t active right now,” Howl frowned. Kathy noticed that when he wasn’t smiling he was really quite plain. “Even so, if you’re worried.” Suddenly the air turned wobbly and then a transparent bubble inflated around them so that all three and the table were insulated inside.

It was Keith’s turn for his mouth to hang open. Kathy whispered, “Won’t everyone notice that we’re in a bubble?”

“Of course not, to them it looks like we are just sitting here talking quietly,” Howl said.

“Uh, very well then.”

Mrs. Oddly was working at the reception desk in the entry and happened to look up and see the children sitting with their guest. Her face, naturally the frowning sort, pulled down into a further waggle as she marched into the dining room.

Howl saw her coming and quietly burst the bubble. “Keith and Kathy, you aren’t remembering your duties. Get up at once,” said Mrs. Oddly. She turned to the Wizard Howl, “I’m terribly sorry sir. For these children to go forgetting their place is very naughty indeed.”

At Mrs. Oddly's entrance, Keith and Kathy had both jumped up and began to scramble to put their aprons back on.

"Now, my dear Mrs. Oddly, no cause for alarm." Howl gave her a luminous smile. At once the old woman could be seen to relax her constant ramrod posture. "I asked them to sit with me to tell me something about this delightful town, this charming inn, and about this most delicious of ales."

Mrs. Oddly made a gurgling sound that may have been a giggle, "If you say so sir. The Goodhosts have been running this inn for nigh on two hundred years. These kids can tell you all about it." She smiled at him. Keith and Kathy were aghast. Mrs. Oddly never smiled, especially at them.

"That's what I thought, my dear woman. Now don't let me keep you from your duties."

"Thank you sir," Mrs. Oddly, still smiling walked back into the entry hall. Before either of the children could sit back down again, Howl had replaced the bubble.

"Now, where were we. Oh, yes, the problem at hand. I can feel this enchantment hanging over this whole town. It nearly got me when walked into it," Howl fingered his glass. "I've half a mind to take it off, but that might cause more problems."

Kathy was about to mention the visit by Chrestomanci, but was side tracked by the giggling going on behind her. She turned to see several of the house maids peeking through the doorways. Howl gave them his handsome smile and wagged his fingers at them, which brought on another wave of giggles.

"Is your grandfather still in the same state," Howl said, finally turning back to the them.

"He's still asleep under a spell of some kind. Mrs. Parkins gives him a potion every day," Keith answered.

Howl looked up towards the ceiling, as if searching for something. When it looked like he had found it, he pointed a finger towards it and gave a flick. He grimaced. Not at all handsome, Kathy thought.

"Well, that's torn it," said Howl. "I expect we'll have company in a minute." Keith and Kathy waited for him to explain. He looked a bit sheepish. "I thought I would take care of your grandfather right away, but there was some sort of defensive charm around him."

Knowing full well that Mrs. Parkins was up there now, Keith was getting ready to push Howl out of the room and out of the inn, when the giggling at the door stopped abruptly.

"Yikes, she is very scary looking isn't she," said Howl quietly as he took down the bubble. More grim-faced than usual, Mrs. Parkins marched right up to the table and Kathy and Keith knew a terrific scolding would soon be upon them.

But just then a pretty young woman marched into the dining room by way of the entry hall. Her arms were crossed around her chest and a look of pure anger covered her face. Howl glanced over his shoulder, but quickly turned around hunching his shoulders over his beer. "I was wrong, that one is far scarier."

"Howl Jenkins," said the young woman, her face flushed from her anger, or a walk in the heat outside, was framed by loose wisps of red gold hair. Arms still crossed, she tapped a foot with impatience. Howl looked around sheepishly, giving her a charmed grin. "What, may I ask, are you doing here?"

Howl opened his mouth to answer, but the woman overcut him, "I don't want to hear your excuses. Slithering out again, I take it. You are supposed to be in the Northerton Valley at this very moment."

"I'm on my way, just thought I'd stop here for an hour or two. I've heard so much about the beer, I just had to try it."

“You know Heath Corning is not on the way.”

“It is if you’re going the long way.” His charming smile was beginning to get a bit wobbly. “But Sophie, the beer is really quite divine. Try a sip,” he handed up his half-full glass. Sophie uncrossed her arms, put one hand on her hip, hesitated and then took the glass from Howl. “That is quite good,” she said looking down into the glass as if she couldn’t quite believe it. “That still doesn’t account for your slithering out from a promise you made to Ben.”

“It wasn’t quite a promise,” Howl said. Knowing that he would not be able to hold out much longer, he took a long pull from the glass, trying to finish it.

“Ben thinks it was. And, coming from someone who keeps his words, I trust Ben.” Sophie punctuated her sentence with a nod of her chin.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t make it to Northerton,” Howl said getting up.

“Well, you’re late, which is as good a slithering out. Ben sent me word that he was worried about you. Worried! And here I come looking for you when you know poor Martha is going to have her baby any second now.”

“Now Sophie, you didn’t have to come looking for me. Calcifer, the old turncoat, told you where I was. You needn’t have left Martha for long.”

“As if Calcifer can do a thing with you either.” She took his arm and began to lead him towards the door. Realizing that there were people, close by, watching and listening, she turned and nodded before heading for the exit. “Please excuse me ma’am,” she said to Mrs. Parkins with some dignity, “I don’t mean to be rude, but we are late for an appointment.”

Sophie led Howl, forthwith, out the front door, nodding to the startled Mrs. Oddly on her way out. Keith and Kathy stood, overwhelmed for a moment, then took a hesitant step forward, then another, soon they were following right behind. They weren’t the only ones. Everyone knew that Howl and Sophie lived in a moving castle and if that was truly Howl, his castle couldn’t be far behind.

“Is Martha alright?” Howl asked stepping down onto the road.

“As well as can be expected,” Sophie answered, not budging her grasp on his arm an inch. Everyone could tell he was trying to change the subject. “I tried to bring Morgan with me, but he and Isabel were playing. She bosses him around like you wouldn’t believe. He wouldn’t come, so Lettie said she’d look after him.”

There was some twittery laughter from the crowd that had steadily gathered and who were following them up the street.

“Lettie’s there too? I suppose Fanny is as well. What are you so worried about then? Martha is in the best hands possible.” Howl said in a soothing manner.

“Don’t you try and make it seem like you haven’t slithered out of something again. You know very well that Martha is my baby sister and I need to be there for her.” Sophie, who’s rage seemed to have withered momentarily, came back full steam now and she let Howl have it.

They could hear Howl trying to turn Sophie from her anger in a pleading sort of way. This brought some chuckles from some of the older, married women and whispers from the others. All chattering stopped when they saw, coming right down the main street, a large dark stone building floating along as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Sophie marched Howl right up to one side where a door opened for them. Howl stopped and looked back. Seeing Keith and Kathy he winked at them and gave a quick wave before Sophie pulled him in behind her.

The castle door shut and it made a lazy turn before heading back the way it had come. Before the castle had gone three houses down, Mrs. Parkins called, “Back to work everyone. No time to dawdle over an ostentatious rock pile.”

With many backward glances, everyone who had gathered in the street turned back to their work, or their own dwellings.

Dinner started early that night, as many of the townsfolk came directly to the inn for a pint and refreshments and to talk about the floating building and the Wizard Howl.

“Can you imagine living in a place that goes where ever you’d like?”

“That Wizard Howl has his hands full with a wife such as that.”

“He liked our beer enough to come out of his way for it.”

“A real Royal Wizard here in our little crossroads village.”

These were the topics of conversation overheard by Keith and Kathy as they delivered food and drink and cleaned up tables. Uncle Rummy didn’t arrive home until the very end of dinner hours and he seemed to be in a very cross mood. He took his dinner, as usual, with Keith and Kathy at the table. They were both famished from an over-exciting day and were most relieved to finally sit down to eat. Although, their meal was somewhat spoiled by questions from Uncle Rummy about Howl’s visit.

They did their brewery chores quickly after dinner and went up to their room to finally talk about Howl’s visit. They hadn’t any time alone since he had come. Not even in the cellar as Uncle Rummy had come down with them after dinner and had sat watch while they worked.

In their bedroom with the door firmly shut, Keith flung himself on his bed. “Finally. What a day we’ve had.” Keith waited for an answer from Kathy. When she didn’t reply he sat up. She was examining the wall near the door. Without saying a word, she pointed to a spot, which to Keith, looked blank. “What is it,” he whispered.

Kathy scrunched up her face and put both hands on the wall, a second later a mark glowed visible. She mouthed to Keith, ‘Listening spell.’

They retreated to their beds. In a combination of mouthed words and whispers they agreed to try a bubble device such as the Wizard Howl had used. Keith puffed out his cheeks and shaped his hands in a circle, then slowly pulled them out. Around them grew an opaque, lopsided bubble. Keith grew it until it was big enough to cover both of them sitting on their beds facing each other.

“I think that will do.”

“It’s not quite right,” said Kathy, examining the thin shell covering them. “It doesn’t feel the same.”

In a few seconds, they found out why. Keith was thinking about how to improve the bubble when he noticed it was hard to take a breath. Kathy’s eyes bulged and she gasped, “Keith, no air.” He burst the bubble and both sat panting.

“I think I’ve got it now,” Keith said, recovered enough. He circled his hands again and pulled away. Kathy, inadvertently holding her breath, waited until she felt he was done then breathed in deeply.

“It seems much better,” she said, pointing to the bubble. “It’s clearer than before as well.”

Keith, much relieved, said, "Let's hope it's silent on the outside." Looking at Kathy, he asked, "How did you know to look for a listening spell?"

She glanced at the now empty wall space where the spell was located. "I taught myself while we were doing those mounds of dishes. I knew there had to be one in the kitchen some where, so I sort of felt around the walls. The one in the kitchen is on the shelf next to the back door.

Keith was a bit impressed, but didn't want to let on. "That one must have been here for weeks." They were silent again as they thought of all the conversations they had had about the horrible Rummy and Parkins.

"But remember," said Kathy, "Most of the times we made plans we were in Grandfather's room with the silencing wards."

Keith became a little less worried then. "You're right. So Rummy may not know it was us who wrote to the Wizard Howl."

"You mean that it was I that wrote to him."

"Yeah, I know, but you seemed very eager to tell Chrestomanci that you had called for him as well as me."

"Well," she began sheepishly, "He is quite impressive. I didn't want him to think that I didn't see that."

"Impressive? He was alright, but that Wizard Howl was something else. Casting spells left and right, charming the pants off of old Mrs. Oddly and winking the whole time. He was splendid."

Kathy rolled her eyes, "He was a show-off and so vain. Mr. Chant wasn't like that at all. He knew just what was going on but didn't have to make a grand stand act out of it. And how he took off down the tunnel." She let her gaze go off into the distance in a vague way and didn't tell Keith that she also thought him quite mysterious and so handsome.

It was Keith's turn to roll his eyes. He knew what his sister was thinking. Always looking for the romantic figure she was. "Wizard Howl was much more remarkable."

"But he didn't do anything. He just flattered the staff and got led away by the mean wife of his."

"I don't think she was mean. I thought she was quite pretty, even as mad as she was. Howl didn't think she was mean either, or he wouldn't have winked back like that."

"Wizard Howl is really nothing compared to..." Kathy and Keith both heard Uncle Rummy stumbling on the stair, sputtering curses.

Keith grinned. He watched his sister as she began listening in earnest to Grandfather's room.

"He's setting the wards on the inside," she narrated. Then she heard the voices of Mrs. Parkins and Rummy begin to talk.

"It's no good. The alarm that Sundallo set on the other side was tripped this morning. That means Chrestomanci or one of his agents has been to the cave entrance." Kathy tried to tell Keith was they were saying as they were saying it.

"It can't be a coincidence that Wizard Howl came today. Especially when that silly wife of his gave away that he was supposed to be in Northerton Valley, the very place our contacts have set up shop."

"No, it can't be a coincidence." The voices fell silent for several seconds. Keith and Kathy frowned at each other. They knew, very well, that it had been a complete coincidence.

“I’m waiting to get word from Sundallo. He’s going to try to get us a big shipment here tonight. Then we can cut our losses here and get away by morning.”

They talked about places they would go then and other such matters. Kathy was dutifully repeating everything to Keith, when he hushed her suddenly.

“There’s someone in the cellar. I heard the loading box come down.” He listened, staring off at the corner of the room. “Whoever it is has taken one of the tasting cups and is making for the beer.” He frowned, “It couldn’t be one of the imps could it?” He answered his own question, “Nah, they wouldn’t use a cup.”

He was silent for a bit. “Oh! It’s the Wizard Howl. I just heard his voice. He really does like our beer!”

“Let’s go,” Kathy pulled him off the bed and walked him through their silencing bubble. “Ooh, that was a strange feeling.” She shuddered and went out the door, motioning to her brother to stay quiet. They snuck past Grandfather’s room and crept down the stairs. The kitchen was dark and quiet now. They had always been scared of the kitchen at night, but now they barely had time to notice.

Down the stairs they crept. Even Kathy could hear Howl softly humming a song. As they neared the bottom, they saw him sitting on the bench, leaning comfortably against the wall, his blue and gold coat resting across his lap, and his long legs stretched out. He stopped singing and hopped up when he saw them reach the floor.

“Ah, there you are” he said brightly as if it were every day he found himself in someone else’s cellar drinking their beer. “I knew you’d hear me if I made enough noise. Kathy was nice enough to tell me about how you,” he thought for a second, “Left a bit of hearing in here. Quite clever really. Now, where did we leave off?”

“Sir,” began Keith, “How did you get in here?”

“I came through the delivery box of course,” he thumbed behind him. “Easiest way without waking everybody up.”

“Wizard Howl, sir, what about that woman this afternoon, won’t she be mad?” asked Kathy.

“Who Sophie? No, she just likes to get worked up, so I give her a reason now and then,” he winked. “And once I explained your situation, she understood just as I do that your problem and the thing I was supposed to look into in the Northerton Valley may be one and the same.”

“Really?”

“Really. An awful lot of banned magics have been showing up all over Ingary and Ben traced them to a band of wizards in the Northerton Valley.”

“Do you mean Wizard Suliman,” Keith asked, quite impressed.

“Yes,” Howl answered, hardly missing a beat in his own speech. “Since things like dragon’s blood comes from other worlds, I’ve guessed they might be using your tunnel. It’s this here isn’t it?”

Howl walked over and peered into it. “Doesn’t look like much.” He leaned farther in, then leaned back rather quickly as his nose bumped into a rather finely-made, shiny, charcoal suit coat. Howl, Keith and Kathy all stepped back in alarm. At least the children did, until they looked at the face above the coat.

“Chrestomanci!”

He glanced at the three briefly then looked down, adjusting his sleeves. “I think a silence spell over the tunnel would have been appropriate. I’ve been listening just inside for the last five minutes.”

Howl raised an eyebrow and frowned. The children obviously recognized the dandy. Chrestomanci went on, now looking about the room, "You must be the other royal wizard of Ingary. Ben Suliman has told me about you. You come from his world, I believe?"

Chrestomanci looked right at Howl now. Howl still frowned for a second then walked forward, smiling in his most charming way. He made a slight bow. "How do you do. Ben has not been as forthcoming with me. Who, may I ask, are you?"

"He's the Chrestomanci," Kathy whispered.

"Ah, of course, the Chres . . . The what?" he said looking down at her. Keith smirked, but quickly hid it behind his hand.

"The Chrestomanci is my title." He was looking vaguely towards the cellar stairs. Kathy looked over her shoulder a little worried at what she would find there. "I am the government appointed enchanter that monitors the abuse of magic."

"Oh, that one," Howl said smiling engagingly. "Ben does your bidding or some such in this world."

Chrestomanci looked at him as if he were not quite all there. Kathy did too, before turning her rapt attention back to Chrestomanci. "No. He is my agent in this world and works as an associate. As it happens," he said looking at the back of the room, "just as these children called me here today, I received a missive from Suliman."

Howl stood nonplussed. He looked as if he were trying to think of something smart to say when Chrestomanci held up a hand and turned back to the tunnel. They could all hear the faint crunching of footsteps combined with a "thump, thump" of wood banging. "Someone's come through the barrier."

Chrestomanci moved to the side of the tunnel doorway, back pressed against the wall. Keith and Kathy moved to a stack of empty casks that stood near the stairwell. Howl looked like he was going to try and make it to the loading dock, but realized he was too late and was caught out in the middle of the room. He crouched down next to the large open kettle that was in the process of fermenting. He wasn't well hidden, but the cellar, never brightly lit, was dim in the night.

Then, many things happened at once.

Her eyes fixed on the tunnel, Kathy heard Uncle Rummy stir, make some 'Mmm hmm' and 'Uh huh' noises and begin to speak to Mrs. Parkins just as two men, who looked very similar, came through the tunnel door, both carrying a stack of boxes, "That's it mother, Sundallo is sending the last of the boxes through. Kill the old man and gather our things. We'll blast the tunnel on the way out."

At that moment, the second pair of same-looking men came through the tunnel door and each turned immediately to the side. The one that turned left caught Chrestomanci and did something to him that made him sag. The first two bearers had reached Howl, who flew up into the air as a dragon. The dragon flowed out of the cellar and through the tunnel doorway, going very, very fast. "A dragon," one of the workmen exclaimed, "Let's get it." Kathy screamed "They're going to kill him," and took Keith's arm wrenching him with her as she teleported straight to Grandfather's room.

They landed with a sprong on the bed just as the door latched behind Rummy. He had not removed the silencing wards so had not heard the crash as the children came tumbling into the room. Hastily, they got off the bed. Kathy adjusted Grandfather as best she could, then stood next to Keith, holding his hand. They took two big steps forward, blocking Grandfather. Their steely faces set for anything.

Mrs. Parkins had been at the dresser fiddling at her bottles of medicine. She turned around holding a spoon and a small bottle with a dark reddish brown liquid. Her face a red mask of anger.

“How did you . . . I should have known you nosy children would try to interfere.” Before she could do make any further move, Kathy held out her free hand. Every glass in the room shattered, including the large mirror over the dresser and the bottle in Mrs. Parkins hand. The red brown liquid dripped from her fingers and began to smoke. She hastily wiped her hand on her apron, where the liquid burned slow holes into the material.

She looked up ready to lay into them, when Keith held up his free hand and sent a bubble towards her. It grew and grew until it covered Mrs. Parkins, then it attached itself to the wall. She poked at it and kicked, getting desperate she start to scratch at with her nails. The whole while her mouth was moving as if she were talking, but neither of them could hear her.

“What did you do?” asked Kathy.

“I turned the silence bubble inward and glued it to the wall.”

Kathy beamed at her brother. “That was clever of you. How long do you think it will hold?”

Keith wasn’t listening to her. He looked in the direction of the stairs and the cellar. “We’ve got to go. Rummy has Chrestomanci.”

“What?” she exclaimed as Keith pulled her out of the room. Mrs. Parkins eyes were following them and she still seemed to be speaking. Kathy pointed to the bubble to give some more strength, then allowed Keith to pull her out. He was whispering, trying to tell her what was happening, but there was too much going on. It seemed a lot had happened in the few minutes they had been in Grandfather’s room. At the top of the stairs he stopped, fiddled with his ear a moment, then put an invisible something into Kathy’s free hand.

“Put it to your ear,” he told her. Kathy did and now she could hear what was going on in the cellar as well. Listening carefully, they crept through the house down to the cellar, the second time in a half hour.

Rummy was laughing a nasally sort of laugh. “Knew, of course, that you were likely to interfere. Had the lads carrying silver spoons since the first day. I had those silver cuffs made especially.” He continued to laugh.

“You’re one of those Coven Street wizards, I believe,” said the voice of Chrestomanci, sounding bored. “I thought we took your magic away.”

Rummy sounded grave when he next spoke. “Oh you did, sir. As it turns out, in this world I have a great deal of magic. Far more than in our home world. Dear mother, though, has no more magic here than she did at home once you had taken hers. Funny that.” The merriment returned to his voice. “She’ll be down in a moment. I’m sure she will have a few choice words for you.”

Keith and Kathy were at the top of the cellar stairs now. They went to open the door and found it locked.

From the sound of it, several people trumped into the cellar from the tunnel. They heard boxes being settled. Rummy said, “My cousins, the Nostrums, are suffering miserably from what you did to them. But once I am through here I plan on bringing them here to this world with me. No doubt they’ll have their magic returned as I did.” He wheezed a chuckle. Offhandedly he continued, “I wonder where Mother got off to?”

“She must have been held up somewhere.” It sounded like Chrestomanci was yawning.

Kathy and Keith had been taking turns on the door, but neither of them could get it to budge. Then Kathy whispered to the lock, “I’ve turned you and opened you hundreds and hundreds of times. I’m going to turn you now and you are going to open as you always have, lock or no.” She gave the handle a normal turn, willing it to

open. “And you’re going to do it quietly,” she added remembering its usual creak. It felt like it was going to stick again, but after a extra tug from Kathy, it unlatched and let them through.

They began a stealthy creep down. They now heard, without the aid of the listening spell, the footsteps of people coming into the room. Kathy gave Keith his bit of hearing back. They paused just above where the light illuminated the stairs. They could sometimes see a pair of feet. Then they heard the other men going back into the tunnel.

Rummy called behind them, “Make sure you bring back all the boxes. This is your last trip.” After another moment, he continued, “I’ll be right back. Don’t you move.” He laughed heartily at his attempt at a joke and went into the tunnel.

After a count to five, Keith and Kathy hurtled down the stairs. They immediately saw Chrestomanci huddled on the bench, looking very unwell, despite the vague look about him. His attention snapped to when Keith and Kathy loped silently across the room, seemingly walking on air. Up close he looked even worse.

“Get these cuffs off me, please.” He held out his arms towards them. They could see now, great silver hand-cuffs which gripped his arms. He was having a hard time breathing. “Silver. In this series, makes me very sick. If you do it together you should be able to get them off.”

They took one another’s hands. Kathy put two fingers on the links of the cuffs and both of them together willed the cuffs off. The only thing they managed was to make them slightly larger. Chrestomanci wiggled his hands in them, but couldn’t get free.

They were all stopped short by a jolly whistling coming down the tunnel.

“Nice of that fellow to announce himself like that.” Chrestomanci winced. “You need to hide. But first, please take the spoon from my pocket.” He looked down at his right side.

Kathy stooped to pluck out a shiny silver spoon, then followed Keith across the hearth to the gap where it stuck out a foot from the wall. A large barrel stood very near and they squeezed in behind it. It wasn’t a very good hiding spot, for if Rummy looked directly at that corner, then he would see them right away. They hoped he wouldn’t see them.

They heard Rummy enter the cellar, but couldn’t see him for the hearth. Then they saw his men file past carrying crates piled high. They looked at each other in wonder. Then Keith threw up a small bubble of silence around them. “How can they carry all that?”

“They must be wizards, except that they all look identical to Rummy’s driver.”

“They give me the creeps,” he said with a shiver.

Five of the identical men filed past. Once they had placed their prodigious burdens into the loading box, Rummy asked them all to line up in front of the full-up brewing pot in the middle of the room. Kathy said a stability cantrip to try to keep it brewing right, but for all the people and upsets happening, she knew it was likely a lost cause.

The identical men lined up, but now that they could really look at their faces, it made them a bit queasy in the stomach. For none of the men had real faces. They had eye shapes and a bump for the nose, a line for the mouth, but there were no real features. It was like Kathy had originally thought about Rummy’s driver, they were like lumps of dough. It was sickening to look at.

“Here now, there are five of you when there should only be four.” Rummy looked at them all closely. “Grab that one, he’s an imposter.” The second, but one, nearest them looked to make a dash for it, but the others clamped

rigid hands onto the imposter. He fell into the group and made a grab for another one. Soon there was a flailing pile of uncanny men all grabbing at one another.

Rummy stepped forward and threw a glittering sheet over the lot. Now they were all trying to free themselves of the net. In the middle of it all, trying most desperately to flee, was the Wizard Howl. Rummy ran forward and wrapped a glob of black goo around Howl's hands.

The identical men got up and stood to one side of the kettle, while Howl struggled to get the goop from his hands. Rummy laughed triumphantly. "How does it feel to be trapped by one of your own inventions?"

"Not terribly well." He continued to struggle a little while more, but finally gave up with the effort of it. Howl took in the room quickly, then focused on Chrestomanci. "What did you do to him. He looks terribly sick."

"That won't matter much longer," Rummy sounded smug to Keith and Kathy still in their silent bubble. Howl noticed them then and gave them a wink. They heard a guttural moan and assumed it was Chrestomanci. He sounded awful.

Rummy began to speak again. The identical men all faced him, their pudgy faces attempted to show that they were paying attention. "Dough boys, listen up. You two go pull up the loading box then go help the other one load up the carriage. You two place the charges in the tunnel." He sounded quite satisfied with himself. As the Dough boys went to their tasks, Rummy continued, "When we seal the tunnel, with you both in it, I'll be a black market hero." Keith and Kathy could hear him rocking back and forth on his heels.

He must have been facing away, for Howl was looking at them mouthing some words and gesturing with his bound hands.

Chrestomanci said, "If you destroy the tunnel, you'll bring down most of this town."

"That's not really my concern," Rummy said smugly.

"Oh, that man. He's horrible," Kathy squeaked. Keith hushed her listening to what was happening.

"Where is Sundallo. He should be here by now." Keith and Kathy heard Rummy's heavy footfalls go into the tunnel. By now, Howl was practically heaving his whole body to get them to come closer. He was making a motion that looked like he was giving them something and then pointed to his wrist. The last two dough boys walked by without looking and went up the stairs.

They stepped away from the wall a few inches and Keith sent the silence bubble towards Howl. Once he was enveloped, he said, "Very good of you. I didn't even see it from here. I need you to pour water on these bonds, really soak them."

"But the water tap is on the other side of the room," Keith whispered even though he needn't.

"Just use beer then. Any liquid will do, as long as there is enough to soak the whole thing."

Kathy had leaned out of the bubble to retrieve a kettle that hung over the hearth. "I hear footsteps, he must be coming back." She dodged back into the bubble and Keith retracted it. They huddled just behind corner of the hearth.

"...could he have gone off to," Rummy's voice echoed into the cellar. "If he doesn't come shortly, I'll leave without him. He can be stuck in that world with those humorless pygmies prodding him about with their spears.."

As he came into the room, Chrestomanci stood up suddenly with a cry of "I'm going to be sick" and rushed across Rummy's path.

“No you don’t old fellow,” Rummy said cheerily grabbing hold of Chrestomanci’s coat. With his back to them, Kathy knelt before the barrel and Keith expanded the bubble then leaned over Kathy, opening the tap. Kathy watched Rummy while Keith watched the beer fill the kettle.

Chrestomanci, with Rummy holding his coat, had collapsed so that Rummy was now trying to hold Chrestomanci up rather than back. “Get off,” he cried and let go of the coat. Chrestomanci crumpled to a sitting heap on the floor, looking worse than ever. Keith turned off the tap and they huddled back behind the hearth.

“On three, I’ll run into the tunnel and you go to Howl with kettle.” Kathy nodded and Keith took away the bubble. He held his hand out and his fingers marked the numbers.

Keith darted across the hearth and into the tunnel entrance, stomping loudly. Kathy crept over to the kettle, in full view of Rummy if his attention hadn’t been taken by Keith’s loud running. “How on earth did he get in here,” Rummy said going to investigate.

Almost before she reached Howl, she began pouring from the kettle. Howl’s hands stretched to meet her.

A resounding “oof” echoed in the cellar as Rummy tripped over Keith’s extended leg. He landed hard in the dirt of the tunnel, wheezily trying to get his breath. To keep him from standing again, Keith leapt onto his back. Another loud “oof” filled the cellar.

The beer was doing the trick. The black goo was starting to melt and in a few seconds more, the last of it dripped from Howl’s hands. He stood, saying “That’s much better.”

He flung a hand towards Chrestomanci and the silver cuffs binding him clattered to the floor to pieces. He took one breath and then another. The color flowed back into his face and, when he stood, he looked as healthy as ever. “Thank you.”

Keith had gotten off Rummy so that he could have another go, but Chrestomanci got to him first. Rummy, stilly wheezing, was pulled feet first back in from the tunnel and was levered up into the air.

Howl spread out the fingers of both hands, then balled them into fists. First two of the Dough boys came squelching in from the tunnel, then another three came undulating down the stairs. Their movements so unhuman-like that Keith and Kathy both turned quite white looking at them.

Rummy hung upside down, purple faced and breathing hard. His coat falling off had pinned his arms straight down from his head. He struggled with his coat while Chrestomanci pulled off his magic.

Howl had the five identical men huddled in a group near the stairs. The driver stood out as he was the only one dressed in livery. “I don’t see the original in this group.”

Chrestomanci turned to the huddled group of Dough boys, a glowing pink ball balanced above his hand. Rummy had given up his struggle and hung quite still, eyes goggling and cheeks wobbling.

“No, the original, Skimski, is in his office in world 5 e with my secretary Tom. We don’t need them.”

Howl looked at the five huddling men creatures and the next second there were just piles of clothes and a heap of dough. Howl snapped and the dough winked away.

“Can you send this magic to someplace in this world where it won’t do any harm?” Chrestomanci bobbed the glowing ball above his hand.

“Certainly,” said Howl. “I know just the fire demon who would love it.” Chrestomanci tossed the ball towards Howl, but it was gone before it reached halfway.

“We ought to take care of the charges,” Chrestomanci turned back to the tunnel.

“Do you mean these?” said a nice-looking bearded man who now stepped through the tunnel doorway. Floating behind him were a number of small wooden boxes.

“Jason, just in time.” Chestomanci said smiling. “Have you secured the other side?”

“Yes, that Sundallo fellow has been incapacitated. Tom has gone through all the books and is making a plan to track down the contraband items.” He had been gathering the wooden boxes as he spoke. When they were all collected, stacked one on top of the other, Chrestomanci created a giant balloon around them that looked like it was made of glass. It floated on the air between the two men.

“This ought to be good,” said Howl to Keith and Kathy, stepping up behind them. They had stood there, completely forgetting themselves, watching all the competing things going on.

Chrestomanci and Jason each stepped back several feet, then the boxes started to smoulder and with a silent explosion that should have been deafening, the inside of the bubble was consumed in green sparks and purple flames. It was a dazzling sight.

Several more people came in through the tunnel greeting Chrestomanci and Howl. The children watched until Howl said to them, “Let’s go see to your grandfather.”

In all the excitement they had forgotten about Grandfather and instantly felt guilty for it. “And Mrs. Parkins,” Keith said. “She mustn’t get away.”

“Of course not,” said Chrestomanci. “Jason, will you come with us. There is one more conspirator whom we need to collect. I think you’re knowledge of medicinal herbs might be needed as well.”

Starting to feel the exhaustion from their momentous day, with a yawn each between them Keith and Kathy slowly led the men up the stairs.

Chrestomanci introduced Howl and Jason, then asked Howl, “Do you always put a weakness into those magical armaments you create for your king?”

“Oh, you know about those?” Howl said sheepishly.

“Of course, as they’ve been showing up all over most of the related worlds over the last two months. Those seven league boots are causing no end of trouble. Ben had mentioned to me that you had a real knack for that type of thing, but you shouldn’t let that king of yours bully you into it.”

“It’s not that the king is a bully,” began Howl, stopped, then began again, “Well, really he is. But I like the challenge.” They could hear the shrug in his voice.

At the entrance to the kitchen, Chrestomanci stopped. Keith and Kathy kept going, not noticing. “Good, the enchantment on the town is broken. I had hoped that it wasn’t a spelled object.” The men continued on.

“It was actually. Calcifer and I found it before I went into the cellar.” Jason looked confused, so Howl explained, “Calcifer is a fire demon. He’s the one who keeps my house in four places at once.” Jason didn’t look any more informed. “The charm was in that Rummy fellow’s bedroom. Would you believe it? It was a griffin’s tooth.”

Keith and Kathy had reached the top of the stairs and waited for the other three to follow.

Chrestomanci reached the second to top stair and tripped. He barely regained his balance before Jason tripped too and grabbed a hold of him for balance. Then Howl tripped. All three tall, stately men were fumbling and wobbling to get upright.

At first Keith and Kathy were horrified that their spell had got three eminent wizards. They had got in the habit weeks before of missing that step, ever since they had spelled it. But their horror changed into hysterical laughter as the men bumbled and shambled upright. Chrestomanci looked so severe that they nearly stopped, but were too far gone. Howl, surprisingly, laughed outright too. Kathy had told him about the spell in her letter. “They used it as an alarm,” Howl explained suppressing his laughs just long enough, “So they wouldn’t get caught using magic or snooping.”

Jason joined in laughing. Chrestomanci even broke into a smile. “Quite clever. I couldn’t even tell there was a charm on the thing.”

Kathy, then Keith, began to quiet down. Their laughing fit had them fully woken up. They led the way the final few steps into Grandfather’s bedroom. He was still in the same state. Mrs. Parkins was still trapped against the wall, slumped over with her chin resting on her chest.

“Did I kill her?” Keith yelled backing away in horror.

Howl leaned close and stuck his finger through the bubble, prodding the old woman, “No, she’s just asleep.” He poked her until she woke with a great start, her mouth moving incessantly. Her sharp eyes boring holes into each of them in turn.

Chrestomanci said, “I was going to ask you to release her, but I think we’ll be better off if she remains inside.” He turned to Keith, “Can you release her from the wall without undoing the silencing spell?”

Keith was so relieved to find that he wasn’t a murderer, he thought he could do anything. With a little tug and a slight pop, Mrs. Parkins bubble came away from the wall.

Kathy was already had Grandfather’s side, so after Chrestomanci took custody of Mrs. Parkins, Keith joined her. Jason was examining the bottle shards along the dresser. Howl leaned casually against the wall.

“I said before that I thought together you could remove the spell Mr. Goodhost is under. Why don’t you have a try?”

Keith took Kathy’s hand and she put her other one into Grandfather’s.

“There is nothing terribly toxic in any of these, Chris,” Jason said. He stooped to examine the remains of the vial on the floor. “This is another story. Essence of night valerian with an infusion of dragon’s blood. That’s deadly.”

Kathy said, never moving her eyes from her grandfather’s face, “That’s the bottle she was holding when I heard Rummy say to kill him.” She sniffed. Jason took up the mess with a sweep of his hand and deposited it in a scaly hide bag he conjured.

Keith and Kathy concentrated then, concentrated hard on making Grandfather better. On making him healthy and free of the spells he’d been given. Still holding hands, Keith moved around the bed, stretching their grip tight. On the other side, he took Grandfather’s other hand.

“That’s it,” said Chrestomanci. “Keep it up.”

Grandfather’s face started to pinken up and his breath became deeper and more regular. Kathy thought it was like that first day when Rummy had come, before Mrs. Parkins took over as nurse.

They hardly noticed when Jason excused himself and took Mrs. Parkins away. Nor did they notice when Chrestomanci and Howl huddled in the back of the room consulting between themselves. For Grandfather was looking healthier and healthier.

“Oh Grandfather,” Kathy murmured, “Come back to us.” Almost as if he had heard her call, he opened his eyes a fraction. Keith and Kathy held on tighter to each other and to Grandfather. He open his eyes wider, his look far away, but it soon came into focus and he managed to turn his head a bit to see his grandchildren on either side of him. He managed a weak smile and squeezed their hands back.

“That’s much better,” said Howl, stepping forward. “I bet you are all full of aches and pains. Let’s see if I can help.” Howl stood over Grandfather’s legs, nudging Keith out of the way, and spread his hands wide. There was a faint buzzing that Keith and Kathy felt more than heard. “When my wife was an old woman, before we married, I learned these spells to make her feel better,” he told Grandfather companionably. “Now the arms.”

Chrestomanci said to Keith and Kathy. “You did a very good job there. Quite powerful magic you were wielding, though I don’t think you know it,” he nodded to their grandfather now sitting up on his own. “Sorry to get your grandfather up and going so quickly. I need to discuss with him the care and keeping of that tunnel.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Keith. Kathy was still holding tight to Grandfather.

“That’s enough, that’s good,” croaked Grandfather, his throat dry from disuse. Howl conjured a glass of water, which Grandfather drank gratefully. He handed the glass back to Howl who made it disappear. He shakily moved his legs over the side of the bed. Cautiously he inched forward until he was standing. Kathy still gripped him tightly, but he was standing on his own. “Now if you’ll leave me so I can get dressed, I’ll let you explain what is going on,” he rasped.

Chrestomanci, nearest the door, let Keith, Kathy and Howl through, closing the door behind him.

“I would like to speak to him about you two as well. That is some very interesting magic you possess, even if you don’t realize it. Wizard Howl has agreed to become your magic instructor.” Howl bowed very politely to them.

“I’m sure we don’t,” said Keith. Kathy continued, “We would have noticed by now.”

“You’ve got your grandfather’s power.” Chrestomanci gestured towards the bedroom. “He’s a very strong wizard in his own right. Wouldn’t you agree Master Howl?” Howl, caught mid-yawn, nodded his agreement.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really ought to be going,” said Howl. “I’ll call back in a week, once everything has been settled.” He gave Keith and Kathy a wink and his charmed smile. Tired as she was, Kathy couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by it.

“You’ll take care of Rummy’s conspirators in this world?” asked Chrestomanci.

“At your service,” Howl hopped and clicked his heels together. “I’ll send word to Ben right away and will be in the Northerton Valley by tomorrow.”

With a wave that was a half salute and a grin that would have given Mrs. Oddly the twitters, Howl left down the stairs.

Chrestomanci continued speaking to the children where he had left off. “At the Chrestomanci castle, we study the different manifestations of magic and have been recently looking into the magic of twins. I would like to invite you to visit, perhaps during your next school holidays.”

Grandfather came out of his room then, a little wobbly but full of determination. “Where did that other fellow go?” Keith and Kathy ran to help and he moved a bit easier with a hand on each of their shoulders. “I know I was under some kind of sleep spell, but how long was I out?”

Helping him down the stairs, everyone tried to explain. Keith and Kathy telling him little tidbits of the story where it was least helpful. At the bottom of the stairs, Chrestomanci said smoothly, looking off in the distance, “Why don’t we wait to tell the whole story when we are comfortably in the cellar.”

“Why would you be going in the cellar, young man?” Grandfather narrowed his eyes. “Only Goodhosts are allowed.”

“Only Goodhosts were allowed, but as for the last two months your cellar has been used as a gateway for a smuggling ring, you can hardly object if I accompany you down.”

Grandfather did object, but Keith and Kathy soothed him enough that he begrudgingly went down to the room behind Chrestomanci.

There were half a dozen people moving about the cellar. It proved to be too much for Grandfather’s weakened state and the children had to move the bench for him to sit on. Conjuring, for them, turned out to be not so very hard. Sharing a secret grin, Keith and Kathy settled Grandfather on the bench. Kathy ran over to one of the barrels and poured Grandfather a beer.

Chrestomanci had been consulting with Jason, who seemed to be running the operation. Men were moving the crates marked “Caution” away from the loading dock and back through the tunnel. A man and a woman were going through boxes that looked more of this world, at least to Keith and Kathy, making an inventory.

Rummy and Mrs. Parkins were hovering in the air, she still in her bubble and he turned right side up, but sleeping.

As Chrestomanci returned to their little group, Grandfather noticed the two criminals and choked on his beer, pointing a shaky hand up at them he said, “That woman was in my nightmares.”

“She is a nightmare,” Keith whispered.

Jason seemed to gather up ropes that were tethering the two criminals and pulled them into the tunnel entrance.

“What will happen to them?” asked Kathy as Chrestomanci rejoined their group.

“We will take them back to their original world, the one where I come from, to be tried in a court of law,” Chrestomanci replied absent-mindedly pulling at a button on his coat sleeve.

“Will they go to jail?” asked Keith. Grandfather was looking between his grandchildren and the fancy dressed man in front of him, seeming quite bewildered.

“I’m certain of it. According to Jason, we have gathered a great deal of evidence against Rumald Parkins and his associate Jerry Sundallo. Sundallo has been remanded to the authorities in his own world.”

Chrestomanci sat across from Grandfather in a chair that wasn’t there before. Kathy went to refill Grandfather’s mug and pour a beer for Chrestomanci too.

With Keith and Kathy tucked on either side of him, Grandfather said, “Now, if you’ll please explain.”

Chrestomanci took a neat sip out of his mug, “You do really make the best tasting beer.”

“Of course,” said Grandfather, “This is one of my own brews. I can taste it. That lot in the middle will have to go.” He looked at the children, “I know you tried your best, but there’s been too much going on here for it to settle right.”

“I imagine,” said Chrestomanci, apparently watching nothing in particular, “that part of what makes it good is the air that circulates from the tunnel.”

“Maybe,” said Grandfather cagily, “Maybe not. But what I need to know now is what has been going on.”

Chrestomanci with a deep sigh began to explain. Keith and Kathy had meant to tell their own parts of the story, but before a minute was out, they were both fast asleep against their grandfather.

They woke late the next day in their own beds. Kathy woke first, the sun streaming onto her. She got up and shook Keith until he was awake. As soon as he saw her face, he was out of bed too. Grandfather was well and Rummy was gone.

They got dressed as fast as they could and ran down the stairs. Fancie and Sarah were working as usual.

“Thought you were going to sleep the whole day,” she said to them with a smile but without her usual enthusiasm.

“Where’s Grandfather?” they asked in unison.

“He out meeting with the town council.” Fancie told them that he had been up all night helping that Chrestomanci fellow put things back to right and had met with the inn staff first thing to explain what had happened.

“We all knew, when we woke this morning, that something wasn’t quite right,” she said with a sniff. “I can’t imagine that we all were fooled by such a pompous man.”

“And that awful old woman,” Sarah chipped in, pounding her mallet extra hard on the beef.

“I’m sorry for you children. Knowing the whole time and nobody to talk to.” She dropped her work and pulled Kathy and Keith into a hug with her strong arms. “But you did alright, didn’t you?”

She gave them each a meat pie, went back to work and back to explaining. “The old man is explaining things to the town right now. He’ll be back soon. He’s right proud of you two, as he should be.”

Fancie, the happiest person either Keith or Kathy had ever met – and they had met a large number of people growing up in an inn – was on the verge of tears. They wrapped their arms around her waist and shushed her until she was, if not back to normal, at least no longer threatening to cry.

Mostly to change the subject, Kathy asked, “Is Chrestomanci still here?”

“Oh no, he was gone before we all got up. Some of his staff maybe. Three of them came upstairs for breakfast.” Kathy was bitterly disappointed that she didn’t get to see him before he left.

Keith, reading her mind, said, “We’ll see him again come the next round of school holidays remember.” Kathy had forgotten and tried to hide her delight.

Grandfather came in the kitchen door then. He looked much better than he had in the middle of the night. He’d been to the barbers and had had a haircut and shave. He wasn’t so unsteady on his feet. They ran to him and he bent down to hug them tight.

People were a bit befuddled by all that had gone on under their charmed noses, so it took some days before Heath Corning again settled into its daily routine. Keith, Kathy, and Grandfather had a lot of work to do cleaning out the brewing room and resetting all the spells.

A little more than a week after, Fancie came into the kitchen early one morning bursting with news, “Wizard Howl’s castle is back. It’s stopped just at the edge of town, lined up like it was the house on the end. You wouldn’t know it didn’t belong there other than it floats several feet off the ground.”

Keith and Kathy scrambled out to the street to look for themselves. Permanent smiles fixed to their faces, they rushed back inside to finish their chores. Howl came for breakfast, smiling and charming everyone he met. Grandfather, who really hadn’t talked to Howl during his ordeal wasn’t quite sure what to make of him. Over their breakfast, Grandfather and Howl agreed that he would give magic lessons on Saturdays. The children were to come to the castle which would find its way to someplace near Heath Corning each week.

The old man and the charming man shook on it. Keith and Kathy, already being fawned over, were doubly so when the staff found they would be getting magic lessons from the best wizard in the land. Even Mrs. Oddly treated them with something like respect.

Everything returned to normal in their busy little town. School started again and the kids were kept very busy between that, their chores, and their new magic lessons.

In a few weeks a large lattice-work iron door came from the smithy two towns away. There were long gaps that dotted the lattice-work, about the size and length of a man’s forearm. It was fitted into the tunnel doorway and fit with a special lock. Added to this security measure where a number of strong wards and defenses added by the whole Goodhost family.

If, from time to time, Keith and Kathy removed some of those wards and went exploring, they decided that it would be their little secret.