

SAPPHIRE
BLUE

PRAISE FOR RUBY RED

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KERSTIN GIER

SAPPHIRE BLUE

*Translated from the German
by Anthea Bell*



HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK



Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010
macteenbooks.com

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First published in the United States in 2012 by Henry Holt and Company, LLC.
Original title: Kerstin Gier, *Saphirblau—Liebe geht durch alle Zeiten*
copyright © 2010 Arena Verlag GmbH, Würzburg, Germany,
published by arrangement with Rights People.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gier, Kerstin.

[Saphirblau. English]

Sapphire blue / Kerstin Gier ; translated from the German
by Anthea Bell.—1st American ed.

p. cm.

“Originally published in Germany in 2010 by Arena Verlag GmbH under the title
Saphirblau: Liebe geht durch alle Zeiten.”—Copyright p.

Sequel to: Ruby red.

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Gwen, the newest and final member of the secret
time-traveling Circle of Twelve, searches through history for the other
time-travelers, aided by friend Lesley, James the ghost, Xemerius the gargoyle
demon, and Gideon, the Diamond, whose fate seems bound with hers.

ISBN 978-0-8050-9266-0 (hc)

- [1. Time travel—Fiction. 2. Family life—London (England)—Fiction.
3. Secret societies—Fiction. 4. London (England)—Fiction.
5. England—Fiction. 6. Great Britain—History—Fiction.]


I. Bell, Anthea. II. Title.

PZ7.G3523Sap 2012 [Fic]—dc23 2011034011

First American Edition—2012 / Designed by April Ward
Printed in the United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,
Harrisonburg, Virginia

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

*Frank,
I could never have
done it without you.*



PROLOGUE

London,
14 May 1602

THE STREETS of Southwark were dark and deserted. The air smelled of waterweeds, sewage, and dead fish. He instinctively held her hand more tightly. “We ought to have gone straight along the riverside. Anyone could easily get lost in this tangle of alleyways,” he whispered.

“Yes, and there’s a thief or a murderer lurking around every corner.” She sounded pleased. “Wonderful, right? Much, much better than sitting in that stuffy room in the Temple building, doing homework!” She picked up the heavy skirts of her dress and hurried on.

He couldn’t suppress a grin. Lucy had a real gift for seeing the bright side of any situation in any historical period. Even Shakespeare’s England, which was supposed to be a Golden Age but looked distinctly sinister just now, held no terrors for Lucy. The opposite, if anything.

“A pity we never get more than three hours,” she said, as he caught up with her. “I’d have enjoyed *Hamlet* more if

I hadn't had to see it in installments." She neatly avoided a squelchy puddle of mud. At least, he fervently hoped it was only mud. Then she performed a few dance steps and twirled around. "*Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all* . . . wasn't that great?"

He nodded, and had to make a huge effort not to grin again. He grinned too often when he was with Lucy. If he didn't watch out, he'd end up looking like some kind of village idiot.

They were on the way to London Bridge. It was a shame that Southwark Bridge, which would have been a much more convenient place for them to cross the river, wasn't yet built. But they'd have to hurry if they didn't want anyone at home to notice that they'd taken this secret trip to the early seventeenth century.

How thankful he would be to take off this stiff white ruff again! It felt like the big plastic collars that dogs have to wear after an operation.

Lucy turned the corner, making for the river. She still seemed to be thinking about Shakespeare. "How much did you give that man to let us into the Globe Theatre, Paul?"

"Four of those heavy coins—don't ask me what they're worth." He laughed. "To him, they could well be a year's wages."

"Anyway, it worked. The seats were super."

Walking fast, they reached London Bridge. Lucy stopped, as she had on their way to the theater, to look at the houses built right over the bridge. But he led her on.

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“You know what Mr. George said: if you stand under a window too long, someone’s going to empty a chamber pot on your head,” he reminded her. “And you’ll draw attention to yourself.”

“You’d never know you were standing on a bridge, would you? It looks like a perfectly normal street. Oh, look, a *traffic jam!* It’s about time they built a few more bridges.”

Unlike the side streets, the bridge was crowded with people, but the carts, carriages, and litters trying to get across to the opposite bank of the Thames could hardly inch their way forward. From up ahead, Lucy and Paul heard voices, curses, horses neighing, but they couldn’t see exactly what was holding up the traffic. A man in a black hat leaned out of the window of a coach right beside them. His starched, white lace ruff came up to his ears.

“Isn’t there some other way across this stinking river?” he called to his coachman in French.

The coachman shook his head. “Even if there was, we can’t turn back—we’re stuck! I’ll walk on ahead and find out what’s happened. I’m sure it will start moving again soon, monsieur.”

Grunting something, the man put his head, complete with hat and ruff, back inside the coach, while the coachman climbed down and made his way through the crowd.

“Did you hear that, Paul? They’re *Frenchmen,*” whispered Lucy, delighted. “Tourists!”

“Yes, terrific, but we must go on. We don’t have much time left.” He vaguely remembered reading that, at some

point, this bridge had been demolished and rebuilt later fifteen yards farther along the river. Not a great place for time travel, then.

They followed the French coachman, but after a while, the people and vehicles were crammed so close together that there was no way of getting through.

"I heard a cart carrying casks of oil caught fire," said the woman just ahead of them, to no one in particular. "If they don't watch out, the whole bridge will go up in flames."

"Though not today, as far as I know," murmured Paul, taking Lucy's arm. "Come on, let's retrace our footsteps and wait to travel back on that side of the river."

"Do you remember the password? Just in case we don't make it in time?"

"Something about gutting caves, wasn't it?"

"*Gutta cavat lapidem*, you idiot. Dripping water wears away stone." Laughing, she looked up at him, her blue eyes bright with pleasure, and suddenly he remembered what his brother Falk had said when he asked about the perfect moment for doing what he wanted to do. "I wouldn't make long speeches if I were you. I'd just do it," Falk advised him. "The girl can only slap your face, and then you'll know."

Of course Falk had wondered aloud exactly who the girl in question was, but Paul didn't want any of those discussions beginning, "You do know, of course, that any links between the de Villiers and Montrose families are purely a business relationship?" and ending, "What's more, all the

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Montrose girls are silly cows, and later on they get to be dragons like Lady Arista.”

Silly cows, indeed! That might apply to the other Montrose girls, but definitely not Lucy.

Lucy, whom he loved more every day, to whom he'd confided things he had never told another living soul. Lucy, someone you could literally—

He took a deep breath.

“Why have you stopped?” asked Lucy, but he was already leaning down to press his lips to hers. For three seconds, he was afraid she was going to push him away, but then she seemed to get over her surprise. She returned his kiss, at first cautiously, then putting her heart into it.

In fact this was anything but the perfect moment, and in fact they were also in a tearing hurry, because they might travel back in time any minute now, and in fact . . .

Paul forgot about the third “in fact.” Nothing counted but Lucy.

But then he caught sight of a figure in a dark hood and took a step back in alarm.

Lucy looked at him for a moment, rather annoyed, before she blushed and lowered her eyes. “Sorry,” she muttered, embarrassed. “Larry Coleman feels the same. He said I kiss like someone pushing a handful of unripe gooseberries into your face.”

“Gooseberries?” He shook his head. “And who on earth is Larry Coleman?”

Now she seemed totally confused, and he couldn't even blame her. He had to straighten out the turmoil in

his head somehow or other. He drew Lucy into the light of the torches, took her by the shoulders, and looked deep into her eyes. "Okay, Lucy: First, you kiss kind of like . . . like strawberries taste. Second, if I ever catch up with this Larry Coleman, I'll punch his nose. Third, don't forget just where we left off. But right at this moment we have a tiny little problem."

Wordlessly, he pointed out the tall man who was now emerging from the shadow of a cart and strolling casually up. The newcomer leaned down to the Frenchman's coach window.

Lucy's eyes widened with alarm.

"Good evening, Baron," said the man. He, too, was speaking French, and at the sound of his voice, Lucy's fingers dug into Paul's arm. "How delightful to see you. You're a long way from Flanders." And he pushed back his hood.

A cry of surprise came from inside the coach. "The bogus marquis! How do you come to be here? What does this mean?"

"I wish I knew, too," whispered Lucy.

"Is that any way to speak to your own descendant?" the tall man cheerfully replied. "I'm the grandson of your grandson's grandson, and although people like to call me the man with no name, I assure you that I have one. Several, in fact. May I join you in your coach? It's not very comfortable standing here, and this bridge is going to be jammed for a good while yet." And without waiting for an answer or looking around again, he opened the door and climbed into the coach.

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Lucy had drawn Paul two steps aside, out of the circle of light cast by the torches. “It really is him! Only much younger. What are we going to do now?”

“Nothing,” Paul whispered back. “We can’t go up to him and say hello! We’re not supposed to be here at all.”

“But how come *he’s* here?”

“Just a stupid coincidence. He mustn’t see us, whatever happens. Come on, we have to reach the bank.”

However, neither of them moved from the spot. They were staring, spellbound, at the dark window of the coach, even more fascinated than they had been by the stage of the Globe Theatre.

“At our last meeting I made my opinion of you very clear.” That was the baron’s voice coming through the coach window.

“Yes, indeed you did!” The other man’s soft laughter brought Paul’s arms out in goose bumps, although he couldn’t have said why.

“My decision is still the same!” The baron’s voice shook slightly. “I will not hand over that diabolical device to the Alliance, whatever evil means you may employ to make me change my mind. I know you’re in league with the Devil.”

“What’s he talking about?” whispered Lucy.

Paul just shook his head.

Once again, they heard a soft laugh. “My blind, narrow-minded ancestor! How much easier your life—and mine as well!—could have been if you’d listened to me, not your bishop or those unfortunate fanatics of the Alliance. If

only you had heard the voice of reason, instead of telling your rosary. If only you had realized that you are a part of something greater than all your priest says in his sermons.”

The baron’s answer seemed to consist of the Lord’s Prayer. Lucy and Paul heard him gabbling it under his breath.

“Amen!” said his visitor, with a sigh. “So that’s your last word?”

“You are the Devil incarnate!” said the baron. “Get out of my coach, and never let me set eyes on you again!”

“Just as you wish. There’s only one more little thing I should mention. I didn’t tell you before, so as not to agitate you unnecessarily, but on your tombstone, which I have seen with my own eyes, the date of your death is given as 14 May 1602.”

“But that,” said the baron, “that’s . . .”

“Today. Exactly. And it’s nearly midnight already.”

All that could be heard from the baron was a gasp.

“What’s he doing?” whispered Lucy.

“Breaking his own rules.” Paul’s goose bumps had spread right up to the back of his neck. “He’s talking about—” He interrupted himself, because a familiar queasy sensation was spreading through him.

“My coachman will be back at any moment,” said the baron, and now his voice was distinctly alarmed.

“Yes, I’m sure he will,” replied his visitor, sounding almost bored. “That’s why I’m going to cut this short.”

Lucy had moved her hand down to the region of her stomach. “Paul!”

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“I know, I can feel it myself. Bloody hell. . . . We must run if we don’t want to fall into the middle of the river.” He seized her arm and pulled her on, taking care not to turn his face toward the coach window.

“You’re really supposed to have died in your native land from the effects of a severe attack of influenza,” they heard the other man saying as they slunk past the coach. “But since my earlier visits to you ultimately led to your presence here in London today, and it so happens that you are enjoying the best of health, the equilibrium of a rather sensitive state of affairs is now unbalanced. Correct as I am, I therefore feel it my duty to lend Death a helping hand.”

Paul was concentrating on the queasy feeling inside him and working out how far it still was to the bank, but all the same, the significance of those words seeped into his mind, and he stopped again.

Lucy nudged him in the ribs. “Quick!” she whispered, breaking into a run herself. “We have only a few seconds left!”

Feeling weak at the knees, Paul started off again, and as he ran and the nearby bank began to blur before his eyes, he heard a terrible if muffled scream from inside the coach, followed by a gasp of “you devil!” And then all was deathly quiet.



Today, at 1500 hours, Lucy and Paul were sent to elapse to the year 1948. When they returned at 1900 hours, they landed in the rose bed outside the window of the Dragon Hall, wearing early seventeenth-century costume and drenched to the skin.

They seemed to be very upset; they were talking wildly, and therefore, much against their will, I informed Lord Montrose and Falk de Villiers. However, there turned out to be a simple explanation for the whole affair. Lord Montrose said he still had a vivid recollection of the fancy-dress party held in the garden here in 1948, during which several guests, evidently including Lucy and Paul, had unfortunately landed in the goldfish pool after the excessive consumption of alcohol.

Lord Montrose had taken responsibility for this incident and promised to replace the two rosebushes they had ruined, "Ferdinand Pichard" and "Mrs. John Laing." Lucy and Paul were strictly instructed to abstain from alcoholic beverages in future, no matter what the period.

FROM *THE ANNALS OF THE GUARDIANS*

18 DECEMBER 1992

REPORT: J. MOUNTJOY, ADEPT 2ND DEGREE

ONE



“YOUNG PEOPLE, this is a church! No kissing allowed here!”

Startled, I opened my eyes and hastily sat up straight, expecting to see some old-fashioned priest hurrying indignantly toward me with his cassock billowing, all set to deliver a stern lecture. But it wasn't the priest of this parish church who had disturbed our kiss. It wasn't a human being at all. The speaker was a small gargoyle crouching in the pew right next to the confessional, as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

Although that was hardly possible. Because basically my state of mind couldn't be called mere surprise. To be honest, my powers of thought had switched off entirely.

It had all begun with that kiss.

Gideon de Villiers had kissed me—me, Gwyneth Shepherd.

Of course I should have wondered why the idea came

into his head so suddenly—in a confessional in a church somewhere in Belgravia in the year 1912—just after we’d been running full tilt in headlong flight, and my close-fitting, ankle-length dress with its silly sailor collar kept getting in the way.

I could have made analytical comparisons with kisses I’d had from other boys, trying to work out just why Gideon did it so much better. I might also have stopped to remember that there was a wall between us, and a confessional window through which Gideon had squeezed his head and arms, and these were not the ideal conditions for kissing. Quite apart from the fact that I could do without any more chaos in my life, after discovering only two days ago that I’d inherited my family’s time-traveling gene.

The fact was, however, that I hadn’t been thinking anything at all, except maybe *oh* and *hmm* and *more!*

That’s why I hadn’t noticed the flip-flop sensation inside me, and only now, when the little gargoyle folded his arms and flashed his eyes at me from his pew, only when I saw the confessional curtain—brown, although it had been green velvet a moment ago—did I work it out that meanwhile we’d traveled back to the present.

“Hell!” Gideon moved back to his side of the confessional and rubbed the back of his head.

Hell? I came down from cloud nine with a bump and forgot the gargoyle.

“Oh, I didn’t think it was that bad,” I said, trying to sound as casual as possible. Unfortunately, I was rather

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breathless, which tended to spoil the effect. I couldn't look Gideon in the eye, so instead I kept staring at the brown polyester curtain in the confessional.

Good heavens! I'd traveled nearly a hundred years through time without noticing because that kiss had so totally and absolutely . . . well, surprised me. I mean, one minute here's this guy grousing away at you, the next you're in the middle of a wild chase to get away from men armed with pistols, and suddenly—like, out of nowhere—he's telling you you're something special and kissing you. And, wow, could Gideon kiss! I instantly felt green with jealousy of all the girls he'd learnt to do it with.

"No one in sight." Gideon took a cautious look out of the confessional and then emerged into the church. "Good. We'll catch the bus back to the Temple. Come on, they'll be expecting us."

I stared blankly past the curtain at him. Did that mean that now he was carrying on as if nothing had happened? After a kiss (or before a kiss would really be better, but it was too late for that), you'd think a few basic questions might be cleared up, wouldn't you? Was the kiss some kind of declaration of love? Or had we just been snogging a little because we had nothing better to do?

"I'm not going on a bus in this dress," I said firmly, getting to my feet with as much dignity as possible. I'd sooner have bitten off my tongue than ask any of the questions that had just been going through my head.

The dress was white, with sky-blue satin bows at the waist and the collar, probably the latest fashion in the year

1912, but not quite right for wearing on public transport in the twenty-first century. “Let’s take a taxi,” I added.

Gideon turned to me, but he didn’t object. In that early twentieth-century coat, and with those neat trouser creases, he seemed to feel he wasn’t necessarily dressed for a bus ride either. Although he did look really good in the costume of the time, particularly now that his hair wasn’t combed right back behind his ears like two hours ago. Locks of it were falling untidily over his forehead.

I stepped out into the nave of the church to join him and shivered. It was icy cold in here. Was that because I’d had almost no sleep over the last three days? Or because of what had just happened?

I guessed my body had manufactured more adrenaline in those three days than in all my sixteen years of life before. So much had happened, and I’d had so little time to think about it. My head felt like it was bursting with new information and emotions. If I’d been a character in a strip cartoon, I’d have had a thought bubble with a huge question mark in it hovering over me. And maybe a couple of death’s-heads as well.

I gave myself a little shake. So if Gideon was carrying on as if nothing had happened—well, thanks a lot, I could do the same. “Okay, let’s get out of here,” I said brightly. “I’m cold.”

I tried to push past him, but he took hold of my arm and stopped me. “Listen, about all that just now . . .” He stopped, probably hoping I was going to interrupt him.

Which of course I wasn’t. I was only too keen to hear

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what he had to say. I also found breathing difficult when he was standing so close to me.

“That kiss . . . I didn’t mean . . .” Once again it was only half a sentence. But I immediately finished it in my mind.

I didn’t mean it that way.

Well, obviously, but then he shouldn’t have done it, should he? It was like setting fire to a curtain and then wondering why the whole house burned down. (Okay, silly comparison.) I wasn’t going to make it any easier for him. I looked at him coolly and expectantly. That is, I *tried* to look at him coolly and expectantly, but I probably really had an expression on my face saying, *Oh, I’m cute little Bambi, please don’t shoot me!* There was nothing I could do about that. All I needed was for my lower lip to start trembling.

I didn’t mean it that way! Go on, say it!

But Gideon didn’t say anything. He took a hairpin out of my untidy hair (by now my complicated arrangement of strands must have looked as if a couple of birds had been nesting in it), took one strand, and wound it around his finger. With his other hand, he began stroking my face, and then he bent down and kissed me again, this time very cautiously. I closed my eyes—and the same thing happened as before: my brain suffered that delicious break in transmission. (Well, all it was transmitting was *oh, hmm, and more!*)

But that lasted only about ten seconds, because then a voice right beside us said, irritated, “Not starting that stuff up again, are you?”

Startled, I pushed Gideon slightly away and stared right into the face of the little gargoyle, who was now hanging upside down from the gallery under which we were standing. To be precise, he was the ghost of a gargoyle.

Gideon had let go of my hair and had a neutral expression on his face. Oh, God! What must he think of me now? I could read nothing in his green eyes, or at the most I saw slight surprise there—and annoyance?

“I . . . I thought I heard something,” I murmured.

“Okay,” he said, slowly but in a perfectly friendly tone.

“You heard *me*,” said the gargoyle. “You *heard* me, you did!” He was about the size of a cat, and he had a catlike face, except that as well as his big, pointed, lynxlike ears, he had two round horns, little wings on his back, and a long, scaly, lizard tail ending in a triangular point. He was lashing the tail back and forth in excitement. “You can see me too!”

I didn’t reply.

“We’d better go,” said Gideon.

“You can see me and hear me!” cried the little gargoyle, delighted. He dropped from the gallery to one of the pews and hopped up and down on it. He had a husky voice, like a child with a cold. “I spotted that right away!”

Come to think of it, I *had* seen him before. In that church back in 1912. If I put a foot wrong now, I’d never be rid of him. I deliberately let my eyes wander over the pews with total indifference as I walked to the church door. Gideon held it open for me.

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“Thanks, very kind of you!” said the gargoyle, slipping through onto the church porch with us.

Out on the pavement, I looked up at the sky. It was cloudy, so the sun wasn’t in sight, but at a guess, I thought it must be early evening.

“Wait for me, wait for me!” cried the gargoyle, plucking at the skirt of my dress. “We have to talk! It’s urgent! Hey, you’re treading on my toes. . . . Don’t pretend you can’t see me. I know you can.” A little water shot out of his mouth and formed a tiny puddle around my buttoned boots. “Oops, ’scuse me. Only happens when I get overexcited.”

I looked up at the church façade. I guessed it was Victorian architecture, with stained-glass windows and two elaborate, pretty towers. Brickwork alternated with cream-colored plaster, making a pattern of stripes. But however high I looked, I couldn’t see a single statue on the entire building, let alone another gargoyle. Odd that the ghost was haunting it all the same.

“Here I am!” called the gargoyle, clinging to the masonry right in front of my nose. He could climb like a lizard, of course—they all can. I stared at the brick next to his head for a second and turned away.

The gargoyle wasn’t so sure that I really could see him now. “Oh, *please*,” he said. “It would be so nice to talk to someone else for once, not just the ghost of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”

Quite ingenious of him, but I wasn’t falling for that

one. I did feel sorry for him, but I knew what a nuisance those little pests could be. What's more, he'd disturbed me in mid-kiss, and all because of him, Gideon now probably thought I was a silly girl who didn't know her own mind.

"Please, please, pleeeeeease!" begged the gargoyle.

I went on ignoring him as hard as I could. As if I didn't have enough problems already!

Gideon had gone to the edge of the pavement and was looking out for a taxi to hail. Of course a free one came along at once. Some people have all the luck. Or call it something like natural authority. My grandmother Lady Arista, for instance. She only had to stand at the roadside looking stern, and taxi drivers squealed to a halt right away.

"Coming, Gwyneth?"

"You can't just walk away like that!" The hoarse, child-like voice sounded tearful, heartrending. "When we've only just this minute found each other."

Very likely if we'd been on our own, I'd have let him persuade me to talk to him. In spite of his pointed fangs and clawlike feet, he was kind of cute, and he probably didn't get much company. (I'd bet the ghost of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had more interesting things to do than talk to gargoyles. What was Sir Arthur's ghost up to in London anyway?) But if you start talking to ghosts and so on in front of other people, they think you're a liar or just showing off. That's if you're lucky. If you aren't, which is most of the time, they think you're totally crazy. Besides, the last gargoyle I talked to had been so affectionate and clinging that I could hardly even go to the toilet alone.

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So I got into the taxi with a stony expression and stared straight ahead as we set off, with Gideon sitting next to me and looking out of the window. The taxi driver raised his eyebrows as he examined our costumes in the rearview mirror, but much to his credit, he made no comment.

“It’s nearly six thirty,” said Gideon, obviously trying to strike up a normal conversation. “No wonder I’m dying of starvation.”

Once he’d said it, I realized that I felt the same. I’d hardly managed to get half my breakfast down because of the edgy atmosphere around the family breakfast table, and as usual school lunch had been inedible. I thought rather wistfully of the appetizing sandwiches and scones on Lady Tilney’s tea table. We’d missed out on them as well.

Lady Tilney! Only now did it strike me that Gideon and I had better discuss our adventures in the year 1912. After all, our visit to her had gone wildly off course, and I had no idea what the Guardians, who considered time travel no joking matter, were going to think of that. Gideon and I had traveled back to 1912 on a mission to read Lady Tilney into the chronograph. (To be honest, I still didn’t entirely understand the reasons for that, but the whole thing seemed to be enormously important. As far as I could make it out, the safety of the world itself was at stake, at the very least.) But before we could do anything about that my cousin Lucy and Paul de Villiers came barging in. They were the villains of the piece, or anyway

that's how Gideon's family and Gideon himself saw it. Apparently Lucy and Paul had stolen the other chronograph and hidden in the past with it. No one had heard of them for years—until they turned up at Lady Tilney's house and wrecked our little tea party.

When exactly pistols were drawn was something I'd suppressed out of sheer fright, but at some point, Gideon had held a gun to Lucy's head, a pistol that, strictly speaking, he ought not to have brought with him at all. (Like me when I took my mobile phone into the past, but at least you can't shoot anyone dead with a mobile!) Then we ran for it and took shelter in the church. But all the time I'd been unable to shake off a feeling that the Lucy and Paul situation wasn't quite as black and white as the de Villiers family liked to paint it.

"What are we going to say about Lady Tilney?" I asked.

"Hm." Gideon rubbed his forehead wearily. "I'm not suggesting we should actually lie, but maybe, just this once, it would be a good idea to edit a few things out. You'd better leave the talking to me."

There it was again, that familiar tone of command. "Oh, sure," I said. "I'll just nod and keep my mouth shut, the way a nice girl should."

I instinctively, defiantly, crossed my arms. Why couldn't Gideon act normal? First he kissed me (more than once, at that!), then he was back talking like a lordly Grand Master of the Guardians' Lodge again. What was the idea?

We concentrated on looking out of our respective windows.

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It was Gideon who finally broke the silence, which gave me a certain satisfaction. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” The way he asked, he sounded almost embarrassed.

“What?”

“It’s what my mother always used to say when I was little. If I was looking straight ahead and saying nothing, like you right at this moment.”

“You have a *mother*?” Only when I’d said it did I realize what a silly question it was! Oh, for heaven’s sake!

Gideon raised one eyebrow. “What did you expect?” he asked, amused. “You thought I was an android put together by Uncle Falk and Mr. George?”

“Well, it’s not such an outlandish idea. Do you have photos of yourself as a baby?” Trying to imagine a baby Gideon with a round, soft, plump-cheeked face and a bald head made me grin. “Where are your mum and dad, then? Do they live in London too?”

Gideon shook his head. “My father’s dead, and my mother lives in Antibes in the south of France.” For a brief moment, he pressed his lips together, and I was just thinking he’d retreat into silence when he went on. “With my little brother and her new husband, Monsieur *Do-Call-Me-Papa* Bertelin. He owns a company making platinum and copper microparts for electronic devices, and obviously the cash is rolling in. At least, he called his showy yacht the *Croesus*.”

I was really surprised. So much personal information all at once—it wasn’t a bit like Gideon. “Oh, but it must be cool going on holiday there, right?”

“Of course,” he said with derision. “They have a pool the size of three tennis courts, and the stupid yacht has gold-plated faucets.”

“Sounds better than a cottage without any heating in Peebles, anyway.” My family usually spent the summer up in Scotland. “If I were you, and I had a family in the south of France, I’d be off there like a shot every weekend. Even if they didn’t have any pool or any yacht.”

Gideon looked at me, shaking his head. “Oh, yes? And how would you manage that if you had to travel back to the past every few hours? Not so thrilling if you happen to be driving along the motorway at seventy miles an hour when it happens.”

“Oh.” Somehow this time-travel business was still too new for me to have thought out all the consequences. There were only twelve carriers of the gene—scattered over several centuries—and I couldn’t yet fully grasp that I was one of them. My cousin Charlotte was supposed to have been the time traveler, and she’d prepared herself for the part with gusto. But for reasons that no one could understand, my mother had faked the date of my birth, and now we were in a real mess. Just like Gideon, I had the choice between controlled time travel with the aid of the chronograph or traveling back to the past unexpectedly at any time and from anywhere. And from my own recent experience, I knew that was not much fun.

“Of course you’d have to take the chronograph with you, so that you could always elapse to a safe year now and then,” I said, thinking aloud.

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Gideon uttered a joyless snort. “Yes, that would make nice relaxed travel possible, and I could get to know all sorts of historic places at the same time. But apart from the fact that I’d never be allowed to go around the country with the chronograph in my backpack, what would *you* do without it while I was away?” He was looking past me and out of the window. “Thanks to Lucy and Paul, there’s only that one chronograph, remember?” His voice was heated again, as always when Lucy and Paul were mentioned.

I shrugged my shoulders and looked out of my own window. The taxi was making for Piccadilly at a snail’s pace. Rush hour in the city, great. It would probably have been quicker for us to walk.

“You obviously don’t quite realize that you won’t have many chances to leave these islands in the future, Gwyneth.” There was a touch of bitterness in Gideon’s voice. “Or even this city. Your family ought to have shown you the whole wide world, not just Scotland. It’s too late now. You’ll have to accept the fact that the only way you can see all the places you dream of is on Google Earth.”

The taxi driver reached for a well-worn paperback, leaned back in his seat and began to read, unmoved.

“But . . . but you’ve been to Belgium and Paris,” I said. “To travel back to the past from there and get some of what’s-his-name’s blood, and put it into the—”

“Yes, sure,” he interrupted me. “Along with my uncle, three Guardians, and a *costume designer*. What a fun trip! Apart from the fact that Belgium is such a wildly exotic

country. Don't we all just dream of spending three days in *Belgium* sometime?"

Intimidated by his sudden bitterness, I asked quietly, "Where would you like to go, then, if you could choose?"

"You mean if I wasn't cursed with this time-travel gene? Oh, my God—I wouldn't know where to begin. Chile, Brazil, Peru. Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Canada, Alaska, Vietnam, Nepal, Australia, New Zealand . . ." He grinned faintly. "Well, just about everywhere except the moon. But it's no use thinking about the things you can never do. We just have to reconcile ourselves to our rather boring lives without the chance to travel."

"Except for time travel." I went red, because he had said "our lives," and somehow that sounded so . . . so intimate.

"At least that's something like fair compensation for all this control and being shut up here," said Gideon. "If it wasn't for the time travel, I'd have died of boredom long ago. Paradoxical but true."

"Watching an exciting film now and then would be enough of a kick for me. Honest."

Wistfully, I watched a cyclist weaving his way through the traffic jam. I wanted to get home! The cars ahead of us weren't moving an inch, which seemed to be fine by our cabby, who was deep in his book.

"If your family lives in the south of France, then where do *you* live?" I asked Gideon.

"In an apartment in Chelsea now, but I'm hardly there at all except to shower and sleep. If that." He sighed. Over

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the last three days, he'd obviously had as little sleep as me. Maybe even less. "Before I got my own place, I lived with Uncle Falk in Greenwich since I was eleven. When my mother met Monsieur Po-Face and wanted to leave this country, of course the Guardians objected. After all, there were only a few years to go until my initiation journey, and I still had a lot to learn."

"And your mother left you alone?" My mum could never have brought herself to do such a thing, I was sure of that.

Gideon shrugged his shoulders. "I like my uncle. He's okay when he's not putting on airs as Grand Master of the Lodge. Anyway, I'd a thousand times sooner be with him than my so-called stepfather."

"But . . ." I hardly dared to ask, so I just whispered it. "But don't you miss her?"

Another shrug of the shoulders. "Until I was fifteen, when I could still go away safely, I always spent the holidays in France with her. And my mother comes to London at least twice a year, officially to see me, but to spend Monsieur Bertelin's money is more like it. She has a weakness for clothes and shoes and antique jewelry. And four-star macrobiotic restaurants."

The woman sounded like a real cozy, picture-book mum. "What about your brother?"

"Raphael? He's a real little Frenchman now. Calls Po-Face *Papa* and is going to inherit the platinum-parts empire someday. Although right now it looks as if he won't even pass his final school exams, lazy kid. He'd rather

hang out with girls than study.” Gideon put an arm on the back of the seat behind me, and my breathing frequency instantly stepped up. “Why are you looking so shocked? Not feeling sorry for me or anything, are you?”

“A bit,” I said honestly, thinking of an eleven-year-old boy left behind on his own in England. With mystery mongers who made him take fencing lessons and learn to play the violin. And *polo!* “Falk isn’t even your real uncle, just a distant relation.”

There was an angry hoot behind us. The taxi driver looked up only briefly to move the car on a yard or so, without taking much of his attention away from his book. I just hoped he wasn’t in the middle of a really exciting chapter.

Gideon seemed to take no notice of him. “Falk’s always been like a father to me,” he said. He looked sideways at me with a wry smile. “Really, you don’t have to look at me as if I were David Copperfield.”

What was that all about? Why would I think he was David Copperfield?

Gideon groaned. “I mean the character out of the Dickens novel, not the magician. Don’t you ever read a book?”

There he went again, the old supercilious Gideon. My head had been reeling with all those friendly confidences. Oddly enough, I was almost relieved to have my obnoxious traveling companion back. I looked as haughty as possible and moved slightly away from him. “To be honest, I prefer modern literature.”

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“You do?” Gideon’s eyes were bright with amusement. “Like what, for example?”

He wasn’t to know that my cousin Charlotte had been regularly asking me the same question for years, and just as arrogantly. In fact I read quite a lot of books, and I’m always ready to talk about them, but as Charlotte always dismissed with contempt whatever I was reading as “undemanding” or “stupid girly stuff,” the time came when I’d had enough, and once and for all, I spoilt her fun. Sometimes you have to turn people’s own weapons against them. The trick of it is not to show any hesitation at all as you speak, and to weave in the name of at least one genuine, well-known, bestselling author, preferably if you’ve really read that author’s book. Oh, and in addition, the more exotic and outlandish the names, the better.

I raised my chin and looked Gideon right in the eye. “Well, for instance I like George Matussek, Wally Lamb, Pyotr Selvyeniki, Liisa Tikaanen—in fact, I think Finnish writers are great, they have their own special brand of humor—and then I read everything by Jack August Merrywether, although I was a little disappointed by his last book. I like Helen Marundi, of course, Tahuro Yashamoto, Lawrence Delaney, and then there’s Grimphood, Tcherkovsky, Maland, Pitt. . . .”

Gideon was looking totally taken aback.

I rolled my eyes. “*Rudolf* Pitt, of course, not Brad.”

The corners of his mouth were twitching slightly.

“Although I have to say I really didn’t much care for

Amethyst Snow,” I quickly went on. “Too many high-flown metaphors, don’t you agree? All the time I was reading it, I kept thinking someone must have ghosted it for him.”

“*Amethyst Snow*?” repeated Gideon, and now he was definitely smiling. “Yes, right, I thought it was terribly pompous too. Although I considered *The Amber Avalanche* remarkably good.”

I couldn’t help it—I had to smile back. “Yes, he definitely deserved the Austrian State Prize for Literature for *The Amber Avalanche*. What do you think of Takoshi Mahuro?”

“His early work is okay, but I get rather tired of the way he keeps going back to his childhood traumas,” said Gideon. “When it comes to Japanese writers, I prefer Yamamoto Kawasaki or Haruki Murakami.”

I was giggling helplessly now. “But Murakami is real!”

“I know,” said Gideon. “Charlotte gave me one of his books. Next time we’re discussing literature, I’ll recommend her to read *Amethyst Snow*, by . . . what was his name again?”

“Rudolf Pitt.” So Charlotte had given him a book? How—er, how nice of her. Fancy thinking of that. And what else did they do together, besides discuss literature? My fit of the giggles had evaporated, just like that. How could I simply sit here talking away to Gideon as if nothing had happened between us? There were a few basic points we ought to have cleared up first. I stared at him and took a deep breath, without knowing exactly what I wanted to ask him.

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Why did you kiss me?

“Here we are,” said Gideon.

Put off my stroke, I looked out of the window. Sure enough, at some point during our verbal fencing match, the taxi driver had obviously put his book down and gone on with the journey, and now he was about to turn into Crown Office Row in the Temple district, where the secret society of the Guardians had its headquarters. A little later, he was parking the car in one of the reserved slots next to a gleaming Bentley.

“Sure we’re allowed to stop here, are you?”

“It’ll be okay,” Gideon assured him, and got out. “No, Gwyneth, you stay in the taxi while I get the money,” he said as I started climbing out after him. “And don’t forget, whatever they ask us, leave me to do the talking. I’ll be right back.”

“The meter’s still running,” said the taxi driver morosely.

He and I watched Gideon disappear among the venerable buildings of the Temple, and only now did I realize that I’d been left behind as a pledge that the driver would get his fare.

“Are you from the theater?” he asked.

“What?” What was that shadow fluttering overhead?

“I only mean because of the funny costumes.”

“No. The museum.” There were strange scratching noises on the roof of the car. As if a bird had come down on it. A large bird. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” asked the taxi driver.

“I thought I heard a crow or something land on the car,” I said hopefully. But of course it wasn’t a crow dangling head down from the car roof and looking in at the window. It was the little gargoyle from Belgravia. When he saw my horrified expression, his catlike face twisted into a triumphant smile, and he spewed a torrent of water over the windshield.



*True love knows no constraints, no locks or bars.
Past every obstacle it makes its way.
It spreads its wings to soar toward the stars,
No earthly power will make it stop or stay.*

MATTHIAS CLAUDIUS

T W O



“SURPRISE, SURPRISE!” cried the little gargoyle. He’d been talking nonstop ever since I got out of the taxi. “You don’t get to shake me off so easily!”

“Yes, okay, I know. Listen . . .” I looked nervously back at the taxi. I’d told the driver I urgently needed fresh air because I didn’t feel well, and now he was glaring suspiciously our way, wondering why I was talking to a blank wall. There was still no sign of Gideon.

“And I can fly too!” To prove it, the gargoyle spread his wings. “I can fly like a bat. Faster than any taxi.”

“Do please listen. Just because I can see you doesn’t mean that—”

“See me *and* hear me!” the gargoyle interrupted. “Do you know how rare that is? The last person who could see *and* hear me was Madame Tussaud, and I’m sorry to say she didn’t appreciate my company. She usually just sprinkled me with holy water and started praying. Poor dear,

she was rather sensitive.” He rolled his eyes. “Well, you can understand why, after seeing all those heads sliced off by the guillotine. . . .” He spouted another jet of water. It landed right in front of my feet.

“Stop that!”

“Sorry, just excitement! Harking back to when I was a gutter carrying rainwater away.”

My chances of shaking him off again were slim, but at least it was worth a try. I’d adopt a friendly tone. So I bent down to him until our eyes were level. “I’m sure you’re a really nice guy, but you can’t possibly stick around here with me! My life is complicated enough already, and to tell you the truth, the ghosts I already know are as much as I can take. So would you please go away again?”

“I am not a ghost,” said the gargoyle, offended. “I’m a demon. Or what’s left of a demon.”

“What’s the difference?” I asked desperately. “I can’t do with any more ghosts or demons right now, understand? You’ll just have to go back to your church.”

“What’s the difference? Oh, really! Ghosts are only reflections of dead people who for some reason or other don’t want to leave this world. But I was a demon when I was alive. You can’t just lump me in with ordinary ghosts. Anyway, it’s not *my church*. I simply like to hang out there.”

The taxi driver was staring at me with his mouth wide open. Presumably he could hear every word through the car window—every word that *I* said.

I rubbed my forehead. “I couldn’t care less about that. You can’t stay here with me, anyway.”

“What are you afraid of?” The gargoyle came closer, putting his head on one side in a confidential way. “These days no one gets burnt as a witch just for seeing and knowing a bit more than ordinary people.”

“But these days people who talk to ghosts—er, and demons—get sent to mental hospitals,” I said. “Can’t you understand that—” I broke off. There was no point in this. Taking a friendly line with him wasn’t going to get me anywhere. So I frowned and said as brusquely as possible, “I may be able to see you, that’s just my bad luck, but it doesn’t mean you have any claim on my company.”

The gargoyle didn’t seem in the least impressed. “But you have a claim on mine, you lucky—”

“Let me make this perfectly clear: you’re a nuisance! So please go away!” I hissed.

“Won’t! And you’d be sorry later. Here comes your boyfriend, by the way. Kissy kissy!” And he pursed his lips and made loud kissing noises.

“Oh, shut up.” I saw Gideon striding around the corner. “And *go away*.” I said that last bit without moving my lips, like a ventriloquist. But of course the gargoyle still wasn’t impressed.

“No need to take that tone, young lady!” he said, sounding satisfied. “Don’t forget that when you shout the echo comes back the same.”

Gideon wasn’t alone. I saw the stout figure of Mr. George puffing along after him. He had to run to keep up. But even from a distance, I could see him beaming at me.

I straightened up and smoothed down my dress.

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“Gwyneth, thank God!” said Mr. George as he mopped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. “Everything all right, my dear?”

“Fatso there is right out of breath,” said the gargoyle.

“Fine, thanks, Mr. George. We just had a few . . . er, problems . . .”

Gideon, who was giving the taxi driver several banknotes, cast me a warning glance across the car roof.

“. . . with timing,” I murmured, watching the taxi driver turn out into the street, shaking his head, and drive away.

“Yes, Gideon’s told me there were complications. That’s extraordinary. There’s a loophole in the system somewhere. We’ll have to analyze it thoroughly, and maybe do some rethinking. But what really matters is that nothing happened to you two.” Mr. George offered me his arm, which looked a little odd because I was a few inches taller than him. “Come along, my dear. There are things we have to do.”

“I’d really like to get home as soon as possible,” I said. The gargoyle shinned up a drainpipe and made his way along the gutter toward us, hand over hand, singing “Friends Will Be Friends” at the top of his voice.

“Yes, of course you would,” said Mr. George. “But you’ve only spent three hours in the past today. To be on the safe side until tomorrow afternoon, you’ll have to elapse for another couple of hours now. Don’t worry, it won’t be any trouble. A nice comfortable room in the cellars where you can do your homework.”

“But—my mum is sure to be waiting for me and worrying!” What was more, this was Wednesday, and Wednesday was our day for roast chicken and french fries. Not to mention the fact that a bathtub and my bed were waiting for me at home!

And pestering me with homework too, in a situation like this, was really too much! Someone ought just to write the school a note. *Since Gwyneth is away on important time-travel missions these days, she must be excused homework in future.*

The gargoyle was still warbling away on top of the roof, and I had to make a great effort not to put him right. Thanks to SingStar and karaoke afternoons at my friend Lesley’s place, I knew the lyrics to all of Queen’s greatest hits, and I knew for a fact that there were no gherkins in that song.

“Two hours will be enough,” said Gideon, once again taking such long strides that Mr. George and I could hardly keep up. “Then she can go home and have a good sleep.”

I hated it when he talked about me in the third person in front of me. “Yes, and she’ll be glad of that,” I said, “because she really is very tired.”

“We’ll call your mother and explain that you’ll be brought home by ten at the latest,” said Mr. George.

By ten? So long, roast chicken, it’s been good to know you. I’d bet anything my greedy little brother would have guzzled up mine by then.

“*When you’re through with life and all hope is lost,*” sang

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the gargoyle, coming down the brick wall half-flying, half-climbing, to land neatly on the pavement beside me.

“We’ll say you still have lessons,” said Mr. George, more to himself than to me. “Maybe you’d better not mention your trip to the year 1912. She thought you’d been sent to elapse in 1956.”

We’d reached the headquarters of the Guardians. Time travel had been controlled from here for centuries. The de Villiers family was apparently directly descended from Count Saint-Germain, one of the most famous time travelers. We Montroses were the female line, which as the de Villiers men saw it, meant that we didn’t really matter.

It was Count Saint-Germain who had discovered how to control time travel by using the chronograph, and he had also given the crazy order for all twelve time travelers to be read into the wretched thing.

By now the only travelers missing were Lucy, Paul, Lady Tilney, and some other female, a court lady whose name I could never remember. We still had to fix it for those four to give a few drops of their blood.

And the ultimate question was, What exactly was going to happen when all twelve time travelers really had been read into the chronograph, and the Circle of Twelve was closed? No one seemed to know for certain. As for the Guardians, they were like a lot of lemmings where the count was concerned. Blind devotion was a mild description of their attitude.

My own throat tightened up at the mere thought of Saint-Germain, because my only meeting with him in the past had been anything but pleasant.

Mr. George was puffing and blowing as he went up the steps to the house ahead of me. His small, round form always had something comforting about it. At least, he was just about the only one of the whole bunch I trusted an inch. Apart from Gideon—although, no, you couldn't actually say I trusted Gideon.

Outside, the Lodge building looked just like the other buildings in the narrow streets around Temple Church, most of them lawyers' chambers or offices occupied by professors of law. But I knew that the place was much bigger and a great deal grander than it seemed from the street, and there was a huge amount of space in it, particularly below ground level.

Gideon held me back just as we reached the door and hissed into my ear, "I said you were terribly scared, so look a bit upset if you want to get home early this evening."

"I thought I was looking upset already," I murmured.

"They're waiting for you in the Dragon Hall," panted Mr. George at the top of the steps. "You'd better go straight in, and I'll find Mrs. Jenkins and get her to bring you something to eat. You must be hungry by now. Anything special you'd like?"

Before I could tell him, Gideon had taken my arm and was leading me on. "Lots of everything, please!" I called back to Mr. George over my shoulder, before Gideon hauled me through a doorway and into a wide corridor. I

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was having difficulty not stumbling over the hem of my ankle-length skirt.

The gargoyle skipped nimbly along beside us. “I don’t think your boyfriend has very good manners,” he remarked. “This is more the way you’d drag a goat to market.”

“Slow down a bit, can’t you?” I asked Gideon.

“Look, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner you can go home.” Was there a touch of concern in his voice, or did he simply want to get rid of me?

“Yes, but . . . maybe I’d like to be in on this whole meeting too—did you ever think of that? I have a lot of questions, and I’m sick and tired of no one ever giving me any answers.”

Gideon slackened his pace slightly. “No one would give you answers today anyway. All they’ll want to know is how Lucy and Paul came to be lying in wait for us there. And I’m afraid you’re still our prime suspect.”

That *our* cut me to the heart. I resented it.

“But I’m the only one who doesn’t know anything about all this!”

Gideon sighed. “I’ve already tried to explain. *Now* you may be totally ignorant and . . . and innocent, but no one knows what you may do in the future. Don’t forget, you can travel to the past yourself, and that way you could tell them about our visit.” He stopped short. “Well—you *would* be able to tell them.”

I rolled my eyes. “So would you! Anyway, why does it have to be one of us? Couldn’t Margaret Tilney herself have left a message behind in the past? Or the Guardians?”

They could give one of the time travelers a letter to take from any time to any other time—”

“Eh?” asked the gargoyle. “Can you explain what you’re talking about? I can’t make head or tail of it.”

“Of course there are various possible explanations,” said Gideon, definitely slowing his pace now. “But I had a feeling today that Lucy and Paul somehow or other . . . let’s say *impressed* you.” He stopped, let go of my arm, and looked at me seriously. “You could have talked to them, you could have listened to their lies, maybe you’d even have given them your blood for the stolen chronograph voluntarily if I hadn’t been there.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I said. “But I really would have liked to hear what they wanted to say to us. They didn’t seem all that evil to me.”

Gideon nodded. “You see, that’s exactly what I mean. Gwyneth, those two are out to destroy a secret that’s been safely guarded for hundreds of years. They want something that isn’t theirs. And for that they need our blood. I don’t think they’d shrink from anything to lay hands on it.” He pushed a curly strand of brown hair back from his forehead, and I instinctively held my breath.

Oh, God, he looked terrific! Those green eyes, the curve of his lips, the pale skin—everything about him was just perfect. And he smelled so good that for a split second I toyed with the idea of simply leaning my head against his chest. Of course I didn’t.

“Maybe you’ve forgotten that we wanted their blood

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as well. And it was you who put a pistol to Lucy's head, not the other way around," I said. "She didn't have a gun."

An angry line showed between Gideon's eyebrows. "Gwyneth, please don't be so naive. We'd been lured into a trap—as usual. Lucy and Paul had armed reinforcements. It was at least four to one!"

"Two!" I snapped. "I was there too!"

"Five if we count Lady Tilney. But for my pistol, we could be dead by now. Or at least they could have taken blood from us by force, because that's exactly what they were there for. And you wanted to *talk* to them?"

I bit my lip.

"Hello?" said the gargoyle. "Anyone got a thought to spare for me? Because I don't understand this one little bit!"

"I can see why you're confused," said Gideon, much more gently now, but you couldn't miss the patronizing note in his voice. "You've had too many new experiences over these last few days. And you were totally unprepared. How could you understand what it's all about? You ought to be at home in bed. So let's get this over and done with, fast." He reached for my arm again and made me go on. "I'll do the talking, and you confirm my story, right?"

"Yes, so you've said at least twenty times already!" I replied, annoyed, stopping when I saw a brass plate outside the door saying LADIES and bracing my legs. "You can all start without me. I've been needing to go to the loo since June 1912."

Gideon let go of me. “Can you find the way up by yourself?”

“Of course,” I said, although I wasn’t absolutely sure whether I could rely on my sense of direction. This house had too many passages, flights of stairs, doors, and nooks and crannies.

“Great! We’re rid of that pest at last,” said the gargoyle. “Now you can tell me what’s going on.”

I waited until Gideon had disappeared around the next corner, then I opened the door of the ladies’ room and snapped at the gargoyle, “Okay, come on in here!”

“What?” The gargoyle was looking offended. “Into the ladies’ toilet? I kind of don’t think that would—”

“I don’t care what you think it would be. There aren’t many places where a girl can talk to demons in peace, and I don’t want to risk being overheard. So come on.”

Holding his nose, the gargoyle reluctantly followed me into the ladies’, where the only smell was a faint one of lemony disinfectant. I glanced quickly at the cubicles. All vacant. “Right. Now listen to me. I know I’m probably not about to shake you off in a hurry, but if you want to stick around, you have to keep a few rules, understand?”

“No picking my nose, no rude words, no scaring dogs,” chanted the gargoyle.

“What? No, what I want is for you to agree to leaving me alone in private. I want to be on my own at night, and in the bathroom, and if anyone happens to kiss me”—here I had to swallow—“I don’t want any audience then either. Is that clear?”

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“Tut, tut!” The gargoyle clicked his tongue. “And that from someone who’s dragged me into a *ladies’ toilet!*”

“Well, is it a deal? You respect my privacy?”

“No way do I want to watch you showering or—yuck, heaven preserve me!—kissing anyone,” said the gargoyle emphatically. “You really don’t have to worry about that. And as a rule, I think it’s a dead bore watching people asleep. All that snoring and slobbering, not to mention the other stuff—”

“What’s more, I don’t want you gabbling away when I’m at school or talking to someone—and please, if you have to sing, keep it for when I’m not around.”

“I can do a really good trumpet imitation too,” said the gargoyle. “And a tuba imitation. Do you have a dog?”

“No!” I took a deep breath. I was going to need nerves of iron to cope with this little guy.

“Couldn’t you get one? Or a cat would be better than nothing, but they always look down their noses at you, and it’s not so easy to wind a cat up. A good many birds can see me, too. Do you have a bird?”

“My grandmother can’t stand pets,” I said. I was about to say she probably wouldn’t have much time for invisible pets either, but I swallowed the words again. “Okay, now let’s start over again from the beginning: My name is Gwyneth Shepherd. Nice to meet you.”

“Xemerius,” said the gargoyle, beaming all over his face. “Pleased to meet you too.” He climbed up on the washbasin and looked deep into my eyes. “Really! Very, very pleased! Will you buy me a cat?”

“No. And now get out of here. I have to go to the loo.”

“Urggh!” Xemerius stumbled hastily through the door without opening it first, and I heard him strike up “Friends Will Be Friends” again out in the corridor.

I spent much longer in the ladies’ than really necessary. I washed my hands thoroughly and splashed plenty of cold water on my face, hoping it would clear my head. But that didn’t stop my confused ideas from going round and round like a carousel. My reflection in the mirror looked as if crows had been nesting in my hair, and I ran my fingers through it to smooth it out, meanwhile trying to encourage myself. The way my friend Lesley would have done if she’d been here.

“Only a couple of hours and then you’ll be through with it, Gwyneth. And, hey, considering you’re so tired and hungry, you don’t look too bad.”

My reflection peered reproachfully at me out of large eyes rimmed by dark shadows.

“Okay, that was a lie,” I admitted. “You look terrible. But you’ve been known to look worse. For instance when you had chicken pox. So chin up! You can do it.”

I found Xemerius dangling from a chandelier in the corridor like a bat. “It’s a bit creepy in here,” he said. “A one-armed Knight Templar just walked by. Friend of yours?”

“No,” I said. “Thank God, he isn’t. Come on, we have to go this way.”

“Will you explain time travel to me?”

“I don’t understand it myself.”

“Will you buy me a cat?”

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“No.”

“Come to think of it, I know where you can get cats for free. Hey, there’s a *person* inside that suit of armor.”

I cast a surreptitious glance at it. Sure enough, I had the feeling that I saw a pair of eyes glittering behind the closed visor. It was the same suit of armor I’d tapped cheerfully on the shoulder yesterday, naturally thinking it was just there for decoration.

Somehow yesterday seemed years ago.

I met Mrs. Jenkins, the secretary, outside the door of the Dragon Hall. She was carrying a tray and was glad that I could hold the door open for her.

“Just tea and biscuits for now, dear,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Mrs. Mallory went home long ago, and I’ll have to look around the kitchen to see what I can make for you children.”

I nodded politely, but I was sure that with a little effort anyone could have heard my stomach begging, “Oh, do just send out for Chinese!”

They were already waiting for us in the Dragon Hall: Gideon’s uncle Falk, who always reminded me of a wolf, with his amber eyes and mane of gray hair; Dr. White in his eternal black suit; and, to my surprise, my English and history teacher, Mr. Whitman, also known as Mr. Squirrel. I immediately felt twice as uncomfortable and tugged nervously at the pale blue bow on my dress. Only this morning Mr. Whitman had caught my friend Lesley and me skipping a class and read us a lecture. And he’d confiscated all Lesley’s research work. So far we’d only had a strong

suspicion that he belonged to the Inner Circle of the Guardians, but it was officially confirmed now.

“Ah, there you are, Gwyneth,” said Falk de Villiers, in a friendly tone but without smiling. He looked as if he could do with a shave, but maybe he was one of those men who shave in the morning and already look as if they have a three-day growth of beard by evening. Possibly it was just the dark shadow around his mouth, but he looked a lot tenser and more serious than yesterday, or even at mid-day. A *nervous* leader of the wolf pack.

However, Mr. Whitman gave me a wink. Dr. White muttered something incomprehensible in which all I could make out were the words *women* and *punctuality*.

The little fair-haired ghost boy Robert was standing beside Dr. White as usual. He was the only one who seemed glad to see me, because he gave me a beaming smile. Robert was Dr. White’s son, who had drowned at the age of seven in a swimming pool, and now, as a ghost, he stuck close to his father all the time. Of course, no one except for me could see him, and because Dr. White was always there too, I still hadn’t managed to have a proper conversation with Robert.

Gideon was leaning against one of the lavishly decorated walls. His gaze moved only briefly over me and then stopped at the biscuits on Mrs. Jenkins’s tray. With luck, his stomach was growling as loudly as mine.

Xemerius had slipped into the room ahead of me and was looking around appreciatively. “Wow,” he said. “This place is quite something!” He walked all around it once,

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admiring the elaborate carvings on the walls. I never tired of looking at them myself. I specially liked the mermaid swimming above the sofa. Every one of her scales was carved in detail, and her fins shimmered in all imaginable shades of blue and turquoise. But the hall owed its name to the gigantic dragon winding its way along the high ceiling between the chandeliers, looking as lifelike as if it might unfold its wings and fly away any moment.

At the sight of Xemerius, the little ghost boy widened his eyes in astonishment and hid behind Dr. White's legs.

I would have liked to say, "He won't hurt you. He only wants to play" (hoping that was true), but talking to a ghost about a demon when you're in a room full of people who can't see either of them is not to be recommended.

"I'll just go and see whether I can find anything else to eat in the kitchen," said Mrs. Jenkins.

"You ought to have gone home some time ago, Mrs. Jenkins," said Falk de Villiers. "You've been doing too much overtime recently."

"Yes, off you go home," Dr. White snapped at her abruptly. "No one here's going to starve to death."

Oh, yes, they were! I was. And I felt sure that Gideon was thinking exactly the same. When our eyes met, he smiled.

"Biscuits are not what I'd call a healthy, well-balanced supper for children," protested Mrs. Jenkins, but under her breath. Of course Gideon and I weren't children anymore, but we could have done with a good meal all the same. A pity Mrs. Jenkins was the only one who shared my opinion,

because unfortunately she didn't have much say in the matter. At the door she almost collided with Mr. George, still out of breath and now also carrying two heavy leather-bound folio volumes.

"Ah, Mrs. Jenkins," he said. "Thank you so much for the tea. Do lock up the office and go home now."

Mrs. Jenkins made a disapproving face, but she only replied politely, "See you tomorrow morning."

Mr. George closed the door behind her, with a loud snort, and put the thick books on the table. "Well, here I am. Now we can start. With only four members of the Inner Circle present, we don't have the necessary quorum to make decisions, but we'll be almost at full strength tomorrow. As we expected, Sinclair and Hawkins are not available, and they've both transferred their voting rights to me. Today we're just concerned with establishing a rough plan of action."

"We'd better sit down." Falk pointed to the chairs standing around the table under the carved dragon, and we each took one of them.

Gideon hung his Edwardian coat over the back of his chair, opposite the place where I was sitting, and rolled up his shirtsleeves. "I'll say it again: Gwyneth doesn't have to be at this meeting. She's tired and terrified. She should elapse, and then someone must take her home."

And first someone should give her a pizza. With extra cheese.

"Don't worry. Gwyneth will only be asked to give us a brief account of her impressions," said Mr. George. "Then I'll take her down to the chronograph myself."

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"I can't say she appears to me particularly terrified," muttered black-clad Dr. White. Robert, the little ghost boy, was standing behind the back of his chair and casting curious glances at the sofa, on which Xemerius was now lounging.

"What's that *thingy*?" Robert asked me.

Of course I didn't answer.

"I am not a thingy. I'm a good friend of Gwyneth's," replied Xemerius for me, putting out his tongue. "You might even say her best friend. She's going to buy me a dog."

I cast the sofa a stern glance.

"The impossible has happened," Falk began. "When Gideon and Gwyneth visited Lady Tilney, they were expected. All of us here can confirm that we chose the date and time of their visit entirely at random. Yet Lucy and Paul were waiting for them. It can't conceivably be coincidence."

"Which means someone must have told them about that visit," said Mr. George, who was leafing through one of the folio volumes. "The only question is who."

"Or when, more like it," said Dr. White, looking at me.

"And why," I said.

Gideon frowned. "*Why* is obvious. They need our blood to read it into the chronograph they stole. That's why they brought reinforcements."

"But there's not a word about your visit in the *Annals*," said Mr. George. "And yet the two of you were in contact with at least three of the Guardians of the time, not to mention the guards posted at the doors. Can you remember their names?"

“The First Secretary met us himself.” Gideon pushed a lock of hair back. “Burgess, or some such name. He said the brothers Jonathan and Timothy de Villiers were expected to elapse there early in the evening and Lady Tilney had already elapsed early that morning. And then a man called Winsley took us to Belgravia in a cab. He was supposed to wait at the door for us there, but when we came out of the house, the cab had disappeared. We had to get away on foot, find a place to lie low, and wait to travel back.”

I felt myself blushing when I remembered the place where we’d been lying low. I quickly helped myself to a biscuit and let my hair fall over my face.

“The report that day was written by a Guardian in the Inner Circle, a man called Frank Mine. It’s only a few lines long, says a little about the weather, then he mentions a suffragettes’ protest march in the city, says Lady Tilney turned up punctually to elapse, and that’s it. No unusual incidents, he adds. There’s no mention of the de Villiers twins, but they too were members of the Inner Circle at the time.” Mr. George sighed, and closed the folio volume. “Very strange. It all points to a conspiracy in our own ranks.”

“And the main question,” said Mr. Whitman, “remains how Lucy and Paul could know that you two would visit Lady Tilney’s house at that time and on that day.”

“Wow,” said Xemerius from the sofa. “All these names. Enough to make your head spin.”

“The answer to that is obvious,” said Dr. White, his eyes resting on me again.

We were all staring thoughtfully and gloomily into

space, me included. I hadn't done anything, but obviously all the others were assuming that at some future date I'd feel that I had to tell Lucy and Paul when we were going to visit Lady Tilney, for a reason so far unknown. It was all terribly confusing, and the longer I thought about it, the more illogical it seemed to me. Suddenly I felt very much alone.

"What sort of freaks are you all?" said Xemerius, jumping up from the sofa to hang head down from one of the gigantic chandeliers. "Time travel—I ask you! I've seen a lot of things in my time, but this is new even to me."

"There's one thing I don't understand," I said. "Why were you expecting to find something about our visit in those *Annals*, Mr. George? I mean, if there had been, then you'd have seen it already, and you'd have known that we were going there that day *and* what would happen to us. Or is it like that film with Ashton Kutcher, *The Butterfly Effect*? And every time one of us comes back from the past, the whole future has changed?"

"That's an interesting and very philosophical question, Gwyneth," said Mr. Whitman, as if we were in one of his classes. "I don't know the film you're talking about, but it's true, according to the laws of logic, that the tiniest change in the past can have a great influence on the future. There's a short story by Ray Bradbury in which—"

"Perhaps we can put off philosophical discussion to some other time," Falk interrupted him. "At the moment I'd like to hear the details of the ambush in Lady Tilney's house and how you managed to get away."

I looked at Gideon. Right, it was up to him to give his pistol-free version of the story. I helped myself to another biscuit.

“We were lucky,” said Gideon, his voice just as calm as before. “I realized that there was something wrong at once. Lady Tilney didn’t seem at all surprised to see us. The table was laid for afternoon tea, and when Paul and Lucy turned up and the butler stationed himself in the doorway, Gwyneth and I escaped into the next room and down the servants’ stairs. The cab had disappeared, so we got away on foot.” He didn’t seem to find lying difficult. No giveaway red face, no batting of his eyelids, no artificial looking up, not a trace of uncertainty in his voice. All the same, I still thought his version of the story lacked a certain something to make it credible.

“Strange,” said Dr. White. “If the ambush had been properly planned, they’d have been armed and would have made sure that you two couldn’t get away.”

“My head’s still spinning,” said Xemerius, back on the sofa. “I hate all these crazy verbs, using a subjunctive to get what’s happened in the future and the past mixed up.”

I looked expectantly at Gideon. If he was going to stick to the pistol-free version, he’d have to come up with a bright idea now.

“I think we simply took them by surprise,” said Gideon.

“Hm,” said Falk. The others didn’t look entirely convinced either. No wonder! Gideon had botched the job! If you were lying, you had to come up with confusing details that wouldn’t interest anyone.

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“We really did move fast,” I said hastily. “The servants’ stairs had obviously just been polished, and I nearly slipped, in fact I more or less slid down the stairs instead of running down them. If I hadn’t held on to the banister rail, right now I’d be lying in the year 1912 with a broken neck. Come to think of it, what happens if you die while you’re away time traveling? Does your dead body travel back of its own accord? Well, anyway, we were lucky that the door at the bottom of the stairs was open, because a maid was just coming in with a shopping basket. A fat blonde. I thought Gideon was going to knock her over, and there were eggs in that basket, which would have made a terrible mess, but we managed to run past her and down the street as fast as we could go. I have a blister on my toe.”

Gideon was leaning back in his chair with his arms folded. I couldn’t interpret the look on his face, but it didn’t seem to be either appreciative or grateful.

“Next time I’m going to wear sneakers,” I said into the general silence. Then I took another biscuit. No one else wanted to eat them.

“I have a theory,” said Mr. Whitman slowly, toying with the signet ring on his right hand. “And the longer I think about it, the more certain I feel that I’m on the right track. If—”

“I’m beginning to feel rather foolish because I’ve said it so often already. But *she* ought not to be present at this discussion,” said Gideon.

I felt the pang in my heart turn to something worse. I wasn’t just offended anymore, I was downright cross.

“He’s right,” agreed Dr. White. “It’s sheer stupidity to let her take part in our deliberations.”

“But we also need to know what Gwyneth remembers,” said Mr. George. “Any impressions, however small—what they wore, what they said, what they looked like—could give us a good idea of Paul and Lucy’s present time base.”

“She’ll still remember all that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow,” said Falk de Villiers. “I think it really would be best for you to take her down to elapse now, Thomas.”

Mr. George crossed his arms over his fat little paunch and said nothing.

“I’ll go down to the chronograph and supervise her journey,” said Mr. Whitman, pushing his chair back.

“Right.” Falk nodded. “Two hours will be plenty. One of the adepts can wait for her to travel back. We need you up here with us.”

I looked inquiringly at Mr. George. He only shrugged his shoulders, resigned.

“Come along, Gwyneth.” Mr. Whitman was on his feet. “The sooner you get it behind you, the sooner you’ll be in bed, and then at least you’ll be fit for classes at school tomorrow. I’m looking forward to reading your essay on Shakespeare.”

Good heavens. What a nerve the man had! Starting on about Shakespeare now . . . it really was the end!

For a moment I wondered whether to protest, but then I decided not to. I didn’t really want to listen to any more

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idiotic babble. I wanted to go home and forget this whole time-travel business, Gideon included. Let them go on mulling over mysteries in their stupid Dragon Hall until they dropped with sheer exhaustion. I wished that on Gideon most of all, plus a nightmare after he'd showered and gone to bed!

Xemerius was right, they were freaks, the whole lot of them.

The silly thing was that, all the same, I couldn't help glancing at Gideon, and thinking something crazy along the lines of *if he'd only smile just once now, I'd forgive him everything.*

Of course he didn't. Instead he just looked at me expressionlessly. It was impossible to tell what was going on inside his head. For a moment, the idea that we'd kissed was miles away, and for some reason, I suddenly thought of the silly rhyme that Cynthia Dale, our authority at school on everything to do with love, always liked to chant. "Green eyes, cold as ice, no idea that love is nice."

"Good night," I said with dignity.

"Good night," all the others murmured. All of them except Gideon, that is. He said, "Don't forget to blindfold her, Mr. Whitman."

Mr. George snorted crossly through his nose. As Mr. Whitman opened the door and propelled me out into the corridor, I heard Mr. George saying, "Have you stopped to think that this policy of excluding her could be the very reason why the things that are going to happen do happen?"

Whether anyone had an answer to that I didn't hear. The heavy door latched shut, cutting off the sound of their voices.

Xemerius was scratching his head with the tip of his tail. "That's the weirdest secret society I ever came across!"

"Don't take it to heart, Gwyneth," said Mr. Whitman. He took a black scarf out of his jacket pocket and held it under my nose. "It's just that you're the new factor in the game. The great unknown in the equation."

What was I supposed to say to that? Three days ago, I didn't even have an inkling about the existence of the Guardians. Three days ago, my life had still been perfectly normal. Well, reasonably normal. "Mr. Whitman, before you blindfold me . . . could we stop in Madame Rossini's sewing room and fetch my things? I've left two sets of my school uniform here now, and I'll need something to wear tomorrow. My school bag is there too."

"Of course." Mr. Whitman waved the scarf cheerfully in the air as he walked along. "In fact, you can change your clothes there. You won't be meeting anyone in the past. What year shall we send you to?"

"Makes no difference if I'm shut up in a cellar, does it?" I said.

"Let's see, it has to be a year when you can land in . . . er, in the aforesaid cellar without any problems. That's all right after 1945—for a few years before that, the cellars were used as air raid shelters. How about 1974? The year when I was born, a good year." He laughed. "Or shall we try 30 July 1966? That's when England beat Germany in the World

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Cup final. But I don't suppose you're very interested in football, are you?"

"Particularly not when I'm holed up in a cellar without any windows, a long way below ground level," I said wearily.

"It's all done for your own safety." Mr. Whitman sighed.

"Hold on a moment," said Xemerius, who was flying along beside me. "I can't quite keep up with all this. Does it mean you're going to get into a time machine now and disappear into the past?"

"Yes, exactly," I told him.

"Then let's go for the year 1948," said Mr. Whitman happily. "The year of the London Olympic Games."

He was walking ahead, so he couldn't see me roll my eyes.

"Time travel! Wow! Interesting girlfriend I've found myself!" said Xemerius, and for the first time I thought I detected a note of respect in his voice.

THE ROOM where the chronograph was kept was deep underground, and although I'd always been brought down here and led up again blindfolded, by now I had some idea where it was. If only because in both 1912 and 1782 I'd been allowed to leave the room without a blindfold. When Mr. Whitman led me, blindfolded now, away from Madame Rossini's sewing room and along the corridors and staircases, the way began to seem quite familiar, and it was only at the end of it that I felt Mr. Whitman was taking an extra detour to confuse me.

“He really piles on the suspense, doesn’t he?” said Xemerius. “Why did they hide this time machine down in a deep, dark cellar?”

I heard Mr. Whitman talking to someone, then a heavy door opened and latched again behind us, and Mr. Whitman took off my blindfold.

I blinked at the light. A red-haired young man in a black suit was standing beside Mr. Whitman. He looked slightly nervous and was sweating with excitement. I glanced around for Xemerius. He was putting his head back through the closed door, just for fun, while the rest of him was here in the room with us.

“Thickest walls I ever saw,” he said when he reappeared. “So thick they could have walled up a bull elephant here sideways, if you see what I mean.”

“Gwyneth, this is Mr. Marley, Adept First Degree,” said Mr. Whitman. “He’ll wait here for you to come back and then take you up again. Mr. Marley, this is Gwyneth Shepherd, the Ruby.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Miss Shepherd.” The red-head made me a little bow.

I smiled at him, feeling a bit embarrassed. “Er . . . pleased to meet you, too.”

Mr. Whitman was doing something to an ultramodern safe with a display of flashing lights. I hadn’t noticed it on my last two visits to this room. It was hidden behind a tapestry on the wall embroidered with what looked like scenes out of medieval fairy tales—knights on horseback with plumed helmets, ladies with pointy hats and veils obviously

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admiring a half-naked young man who had killed a dragon. As Mr. Whitman tapped a sequence of numbers into the keypad of the safe, Mr. Marley discreetly looked down at the floor, but you couldn't make anything out anyway, because Mr. Whitman's broad back hid the display from our eyes. The safe door swung open gently, and Mr. Whitman took out the chronograph in its red velvet wrapping and put it on the table.

Mr. Marley held his breath in surprise.

"This is Mr. Marley's first sight of the chronograph in action," said Mr. Whitman, eyes twinkling at me. With his chin, he indicated a flashlight lying on the table. "Take that just in case there's any problem with the electric light. So you needn't be afraid of the dark."

"Thanks." I wondered whether to ask for an insecticide spray as well. An old cellar was bound to be full of creepy-crawlies—and what about rats? It wasn't fair, sending me off all on my own. "Please could I have a stout stick too?"

"A stick? Gwyneth, you're not going to meet anyone there."

"But there could be rats—"

"Rats are more scared of people than vice versa, believe me." Mr. Whitman had taken the chronograph out of its velvet cloth. "Impressive, don't you think, Mr. Marley?"

"Yes, sir, very impressive, sir." Mr. Marley stared at the device in awe.

"Sucking up!" said Xemerius. "Redheads always suck up, don't you agree?"

"I'd have expected it to be larger, I must say," I said. "And I wouldn't have expected a time machine to look so like a mantelpiece clock."

Xemerius whistled through his teeth. "And look at those clunking great rocks! If they're real, I'm not surprised this thing is kept in a safe." The chronograph did have gemstones of an impressive size set in it, glowing like the crown jewels in among the painting and writing on the surface of the strange device.

"Gwyneth has opted for the year 1948," said Mr. Whitman, as he opened flaps and set tiny little wheels turning and whirring. "What was going on in London at the time, Mr. Marley, do you know?"

"The Olympic Games, sir," said Mr. Marley.

"Show-off!" said Xemerius. "Redheads are always showing off."

"Very good." Mr. Whitman straightened up. "Gwyneth will arrive at twelve noon on the twelfth of August and spend exactly a hundred and twenty minutes there. Are you ready, Gwyneth?"

I swallowed. "I really do wish I knew . . . are you sure I won't meet anyone there?" Not to mention rats and spiders. "When I was on my own before, Mr. George gave me his ring to take with me so I wouldn't come to any harm. . . ."

"That was when you traveled back to the documents room, which has always been much used. But this room will be empty. If you keep quiet and don't leave it—it will be locked, anyway—you definitely won't meet anyone. Hardly anyone ever came into this part of the vaults in the

postwar years. They were busy with reconstructing buildings aboveground all over London then.” Mr. Whitman sighed. “An exciting period.”

“But suppose, just by chance, someone *does* happen to come into this room at that time and sees me? I ought at least to know the password for the day.”

Looking slightly annoyed, Mr. Whitman raised his eyebrows. “No one will come in, Gwyneth. Once again: you’ll land in a locked room, stay there for a hundred and twenty minutes, and then travel back again, and no one in the year 1948 will know anything at all about it. If they did, there’d be something about your visit in the *Annals*. And we don’t have time now to find out the password for that day.”

“Not to Win but to Take Part,” said Mr. Marley shyly.

“What?”

“The password for the duration of the Olympic Games. It’s from the Creed of the Games: ‘The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part.’” Mr. Marley looked awkwardly down at the floor. “I noticed because they’re usually in Latin.”

Xemerius rolled his eyes, and Mr. Whitman looked as if he’d like to do the same. “Really? Well, there you are, then, Gwyneth. Not that you’ll need to know, but if it makes you feel any better . . . come here, will you?”

I went over to the chronograph and gave Mr. Whitman my hand. Xemerius flew down to the floor and landed beside me.

“Now what?” he asked excitedly.

Now came the uncomfortable bit. Mr. Whitman had opened a flap on the chronograph and put my forefinger through the opening.

“I think I’ll just hang on to you,” said Xemerius, clinging to my neck from behind like a monkey. I ought not to have felt anything at all, but in fact there was a general impression of someone putting a wet scarf around me.

Mr. Marley’s eyes were wide with tense interest.

“Thanks for the password,” I told him, and made a face as a sharp needle pricked my finger and the room was filled with red light. I clutched the flashlight, colors and the figures of people swirled around before my eyes, and a jolt passed through my body.



23 June 1542, Florence. I am asked by the leader of the Congregation to inquire into a case that calls for the utmost discretion and delicacy. It is also extremely curious. Elisabetta, the youngest daughter of M.,¹ who has lived for the last ten years in strict seclusion behind convent walls, is allegedly with child by the Devil and will give birth to a succubus.² On visiting the convent, I was indeed able to convince myself of the girl's possible pregnancy and of her somewhat confused state of mind. While the Abbess, who enjoys my full confidence and who appears to be a woman of sound mind and good understanding, does not exclude a natural explanation of the phenomenon, the girl's father expresses suspicions of witchcraft. He claims to have seen, with his own eyes, the Devil in the shape of a young man embracing the girl in the garden, and then dematerializing in a cloud of smoke, leaving behind a slight smell of sulphur.³ Two other girls at school in the convent apparently bear witness that they have seen the Devil several times in the company of Elisabetta and that he has given her gifts in the form of valuable jewels. Improbable as the

¹ We may assume, with probability verging on certainty, that the initial denotes Giovanni Alessandro, Conte di Madrone, 1502–1572, cf. also Lamory, *Noble Italian Families of the Sixteenth Century*, Bologna 1997, p. 112 ff.

² Here, child of demonic origin.

³ The conte may have invented the cloud of smoke and the smell of sulphur to lend greater credibility to this story.

story may sound, in view of the close connection of M. with R.M.⁴ and various friends in the Vatican, it is difficult for me to cast doubt publicly on his sanity and accuse his daughter merely of unchastity. Beginning tomorrow, I am therefore about to conduct interrogations of all involved.

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⁴ R.M.: probably Rudolfo, a member of the Medici family, who created a great stir with his spectacular suicide in the year 1559, see Pavani, *Legends of the Forgotten Medici*, Florence 1988, p. 212 ff.

THREE



“XEMERIUS?” The wet-scarf feeling around my neck had gone away. I switched the flashlight on. But the room where I’d landed was already lit by a dim electric bulb hanging from the ceiling.

“Hello,” someone said.

I spun around. The room was full of a jumble of crates and pieces of furniture, and a pale young man was leaning against the wall by the door.

“Not to Win but to T-take Part,” I stammered.

“Gwyneth Shepherd?” he stammered back.

I nodded. “How do you know?”

The young man took a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and held it out to me. He looked just as excited as I felt. He was wearing suspenders and a small pair of round-rimmed glasses; his fair hair had a side parting and was combed back with a lot of hair cream. He could have been in one of those old gangster films as the precociously

clever but harmless assistant to the hard-boiled chain-smoking detective who falls for the gangster's moll, the girl with all those feather boas who always gets shot in the end.

I calmed down slightly and looked around. There was no one else in the room, and no sign of Xemerius. He might be able to walk through walls, but he obviously couldn't travel in time.

Hesitating briefly, I picked up the piece of paper. It was yellowed, a sheet out of a notebook torn hastily out of the perforations. The message scrawled on it, in surprisingly familiar handwriting, said

*For Lord Lucas Montrose—important!!!
12 August 1948, 12 noon, the alchemical laboratory.
Please come alone.
Gwyneth Shepherd*

My heart began beating faster. Lord Lucas Montrose was my grandfather! He'd died when I was ten. I looked at the curving lines of the two capital *Ls*. No doubt about it, unfortunately; the scrawly writing was exactly like mine. But how could it be?

I looked up at the young man. "Where did you get this? And who are you?"

"Did you write that?"

"Maybe," I said, and my thoughts began frantically going around in circles. If I'd written it, how come I couldn't remember writing it? "Where did you get it?"

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“I’ve had it for five years. Someone put it in my coat pocket along with a letter. On the day of the ceremony for admission to the Second Degree. The letter said, *He who keeps secrets ought also to know the secret behind the secret. Show not only that you can keep quiet, but that you can also think.* No signature. It was in different handwriting from the note, it was—er—rather elegant old-fashioned handwriting.”

I bit my lower lip. “I don’t understand.”

“Nor do I. All these years, I’ve thought it was some kind of test,” said the young man. “Another exam, so to speak. I never talked to anyone about it. I was always waiting for someone to mention it to me or drop more hints. But nothing of that kind happened. And today I stole down here and waited. I wasn’t really expecting anything at all. But then you materialized out of nowhere right in front of me, just like that. At twelve noon on the dot. Why did you write me that note? Why are we meeting down in this remote cellar? And what year do you come from?”

“Two thousand eleven,” I said. “Sorry, but I’m afraid I don’t know the answers to those other questions myself.” I cleared my throat. “So who are you, then?”

“Oh, sorry. My name is Lucas Montrose. No *Lord*. Adept Second Degree.”

My mouth was suddenly dry. “Lucas Montrose of 81 Bourdon Place.”

The young man nodded. “That’s where my parents live, yes.”

“In that case . . .” I stared at him and took a deep breath. “In that case, you’re my grandfather.”

“Oh, not *again*,” said the young man, sighing heavily. Then he pulled himself together, moved away from the wall, dusted down one of the chairs stacked on top of each other in a corner of the room, and offered it to me. “Why don’t we sit down? My legs feel like rubber.”

“Mine too,” I admitted, sinking onto the upholstered seat. Lucas took another chair and sat down opposite me.

“So you’re my granddaughter?” He grinned faintly. “You know, that’s a funny idea for me. I’m not even married. Strictly speaking, I’m not even engaged.”

“How old are you, then? Oh, sorry, I ought to know that. Born 1924—that makes you twenty-four in 1948.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll be twenty-four in three months’ time. And how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Just like Lucy.”

Lucy. I thought of what she’d called after me when we were on the run from Lady Tilney’s house.

I still couldn’t believe that I was sitting in front of my own grandfather. I looked for any likeness to the man who used to tell me exciting stories while I sat on his lap. Who had protected me from Charlotte when she said I was trying to show off by telling ghost stories. But young Lucas Montrose’s smooth face didn’t seem at all like the wrinkled, lined face of the old man I’d known. I did see a likeness to my mum, though—the blue eyes, the firm curve of his chin, the way he was smiling now. I closed my eyes, feeling that all this was simply . . . well, too much for me.

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“So there we are, then,” said Lucas quietly. “Am I . . . er . . . a nice grandpa?”

I felt a prickling in my nose as I fought back tears. So I just nodded.

“All the other time travelers arrive by chronograph officially and in comfort up in the Dragon Hall or in the documents room,” said Lucas. “Why did you pick this gloomy old laboratory?”

“I didn’t pick it.” I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “I didn’t even know it *was* a laboratory. In my time it’s just a normal cellar, with a safe where they keep the chronograph.”

“Really? Well, it’s not been a laboratory for a long time,” said Lucas. “But originally this room was used as a secret alchemy lab. It’s one of the oldest rooms in the whole building. Famous London alchemists and magicians worked here searching for the philosopher’s stone hundreds of years before the Lodge of Count Saint-Germain was even founded. You can still see eerie drawings and mysterious formulas on the walls here and there, and it’s said that the walls are so thick because bones and skulls are built into them.” He stopped, biting his own lower lip. “So you’re my granddaughter. May I ask which of my . . . er, my children is your mother or father?”

“My mum is called Grace,” I said. “She looks like you.”

Lucas nodded. “Lucy told me about Grace. She says she was the nicest of my children, the others were boring.” His mouth twisted. “I can’t imagine having boring children—or any children at all, come to that.”

"Maybe they inherited it from your wife, not you," I murmured.

Lucas sighed. "Since Lucy first turned up here a couple of months ago, everyone's been winding me up because she has red hair, just like a girl I'm . . . er, interested in. But Lucy wouldn't tell me who I'm going to marry, because she thinks I might change my mind. And then none of you would be born."

"I expect the time-travel gene that your future wife must be going to pass on matters more than her hair color," I said. "You ought to have been able to identify her that way."

"That's the funny thing about it." Lucas sat a little further forward on his chair. "There are *two* girls from the Jade Line who seem to me really . . . well, attractive. The Guardians have classified them as observation numbers Four and Eight."

"Oh," I said.

"You see, the fact is that at this moment I can't really decide. Maybe a little hint from you might help me."

I shrugged my shoulders. "If you say so. My grandmother, that's your wife, is La—"

"No!" cried Lucas. He had raised both arms to stop me saying more. "I've changed my mind." He scratched his head, looking awkward. "That's the St. Lennox school uniform, isn't it? I recognize the crest on the buttons."

"Yes, that's right," I said, looking down at my dark blue blazer. Madame Rossini had obviously washed and ironed

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my things. At least, they looked like new and smelled slightly of lavender. She must also have done something clever with the blazer, because it was a much more elegant fit now.

“My sister, Madeleine, goes to St. Lennox, too. She won’t be leaving until the end of this year because the war got in the way.”

“Aunt Maddy? I didn’t know that.”

“All the Montrose girls go to St. Lennox. Lucy too. She had the same school uniform as you. Maddy’s is dark green and white, and the skirt is checked. . . .” Lucas cleared his throat. “In case you’re interested . . . but we’d better concentrate on working out why we’re meeting here. So assuming you wrote that note—”

“Will be writing it!”

“—and you’ll be leaving it for me on one of your future time-travel trips, why do you think you did it?”

“You mean why *will* I be doing it?” I sighed. “It must make some kind of sense. You can probably tell me a lot. But then again, I don’t know. . . .” Baffled, I looked at my young grandfather. “Do you know Lucy and Paul well?”

“Paul de Villiers has been coming here to elapse since January. He’s grown two years older in that time, which is rather creepy. And Lucy came for the first time in June. I usually look after them both when they visit. As a rule, it’s very amusing. I can help them with their homework. I must say, Paul is the only de Villiers I’ve ever liked.” He cleared his throat again. “But if you come from the year

2011, you must know them both. Funny to think they're nearly forty by now. . . . You must give them my regards."

"I can't do that." Oh, dear, this whole thing was so complicated. And I probably ought to be careful what I said, when I myself didn't really understand what was going on. My mother's words were still ringing in my ears. *Trust no one! Not even your own feelings!* But I simply had to trust someone, and who better than my grandfather? I decided to stake everything on a single card. "I can't give Lucy and Paul your regards. They stole the chronograph and traveled back into the past with it."

"What?" Lucas's eyes were wide behind his glasses. "Why would they have done that? I can't believe it. They'd never . . . When is this supposed to have happened?"

"Nineteen ninety-four," I said. "The same year I was born."

"In 1994 Paul will be twenty, and Lucy eighteen," said Lucas, more to himself than to me. "In two years' time, then. Because now she's sixteen and he's eighteen." He smiled apologetically. "Well, of course I don't mean *now*, I only mean their now when they come to this year to elapse."

"I haven't had much sleep the last couple of nights, so I get the feeling my brain is nothing but candy floss," I said. "And I'm useless at arithmetic anyway."

"Lucy and Paul are . . . Oh, what you're telling me makes no sense. They'd never do anything so . . . so *outrageous*."

"But they did. I thought you might be able to tell me

why. In my own time, everyone keeps telling me that they're wicked. Or crazy. Or both. Anyway, dangerous. When I met Lucy, she said I ought to ask you about the Green Rider. Okay. So who or what's the Green Rider?"

Lucas stared at me, baffled. "You met Lucy? But you just said she and Paul had disappeared the year you were born." Then something seemed to occur to him. "If they took the chronograph with them, how can you travel in time at all?"

"I met them in the year 1912. At Lady Tilney's house. And there's another chronograph that the Guardians use for us."

"Lady Tilney? But she died four years ago. And the second chronograph isn't capable of working."

I sighed. "It is now. Listen, Grandpa"—that word made Lucas jump—"this is all much more confusing for me than you, because until a few days ago, I hadn't the faintest idea about it. I can't explain anything to you. I've been sent here to elapse, for heaven's sake, I don't even know how to spell the stupid word—I heard it for the first time yesterday. This is only the third time the chronograph has sent me back to the past. I traveled back uncontrolled three times before that. Which was not a lot of fun. But the fact is that everyone thought my cousin Charlotte was the gene carrier, because she was born on the right day, and my mum lied about my birthday. So Charlotte had dancing lessons instead of me, and she knows all about the plague and King George, and she can fence, and ride side-saddle, and play the piano—and goodness only knows what

she learned during her introduction to the mysteries.” The more I talked, the faster the words came tumbling out of me. “Anyway, I don’t know anything except what they’ve told me so far, and I can’t say that was much, or very enlightening—and what’s worse, I haven’t even had time to make sense of the whole thing. Lesley—she’s my best friend—Googled it all, but Mr. Whitman confiscated her folder, and I’d only copied half of the stuff she found out anyway. Everyone seems to have expected me to be somehow special, and now they’re disappointed.”

“*Ruby red, with G major, the magic of the raven, brings the Circle of Twelve home into safe haven,*” murmured Lucas.

“Yes, well, there you are—magic of the raven, blah blah blah. But I’m the wrong person. Count Saint-Germain throttled me even though he was standing several yards away, and I could hear his voice in my head, and then there were those men with pistols and swords in Hyde Park, and I had to run a sword into one of them because otherwise he’d have killed Gideon, who is . . . who’s such a . . .” I took a deep breath, only to go headlong on the next minute. “Gideon is a pain in the neck, he acts as if I were a millstone around his neck, and this morning he kissed Charlotte, well, only on the cheek, but maybe it meant something, I never ought to have kissed him without asking about that first, after all, I’ve only known him a day or so, but suddenly he was so nice and then . . . oh, it all happened so fast . . . and everyone thinks *I* told Lucy and Paul when we were visiting Lady Tilney because we need her

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blood, and we need some of Lucy and Paul's blood too, but they need Gideon's blood and mine because that's still missing from their chronograph. And no one tells me what's going to happen when everyone's blood has been read into the chronograph, and sometimes I think they don't know for certain themselves. And Lucy said I ought to ask you about the Green Rider."

Lucas had half closed his eyes behind his glasses and was obviously trying desperately to make sense of my torrent of words. "I have no idea what this Green Rider could mean," he said. "I'm sorry, but it's the first time I ever heard of him. Maybe it's the title of a film? Why don't you ask . . . I know, you could simply ask me in the year 2011."

I looked at him, horrified.

"Oh, dear, I see," said Lucas quickly. "You can't, because I'll be dead by then, or old and blind and deaf drowsing away in some senior citizens' home. . . . No, no, please, I really don't want to know."

This time I couldn't hold back my tears. I sobbed for at least half a minute because—strange as it sounds—I suddenly missed my grandfather dreadfully. "I loved you very much," I said at last.

Lucas gave me a handkerchief and looked at me sympathetically. "Are you sure? I don't even like children. Little pests, if you ask me. . . . But maybe you were a particularly nice child. In fact, I'm sure you were."

"Yes, I was. But you were nice to all us kids." I blew my nose noisily. "Even Charlotte."

We said nothing for a little while. Then Lucas took a watch out of his pocket and said, "How much time do we have?"

"They sent me here for exactly two hours."

"Not very long, then. We've wasted far too much time already." He got up. "I'll get pens and paper, and we'll try to find some kind of system in all this chaos. You'd better stay here. Don't move from the spot."

I just nodded. When Lucas had left, I stared into nothing with my face buried in my hands. He was right. It was important to keep a clear head now.

Who knew when I'd meet my grandfather again? Which things that hadn't happened yet ought I to tell him about, which should I hush up? And looking at it the other way around, I was desperately anxious for any information he could give me that might come in useful. Basically, he was my only ally. But living in the wrong time. And how could he cast light, from here, on any of the dark riddles facing me?

Lucas stayed away for some time, and as the minutes passed, I began to doubt my own feelings. Maybe he'd been lying, and any moment now he'd be back with Lucy and Paul and a big knife, to get blood out of me. Finally, feeling worried, I stood up and looked around for something I could use as a weapon. There was a board with a rusty nail in it lying in a corner, but when I picked it up, it crumbled apart in my fingers. At that very moment, the door opened again, and my young grandfather came back with a notepad under his arm and a banana in one hand.

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I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Here, to stave off hunger pangs.” Lucas tossed me the banana, took a third chair off the pile, placed it between us, and put the notepad on it. “Sorry I was so long. That idiot Kenneth de Villiers was upstairs getting in my way. I can’t stand the de Villiers family. Always sticking their long noses into everything, wanting to be in control and make the decisions and always thinking they know best!”

“How right you are,” I murmured.

Lucas shook his wrist to loosen it up. “Then here goes—granddaughter. You’re the Ruby, the twelfth in the Circle. The Diamond, from the de Villiers family, was born two years before you. So he’d be around nineteen in your time. What’s his name again?”

“Gideon,” I said, and just saying it out loud made me feel warm. “Gideon de Villiers.”

Lucas’s pen was hurrying over the paper. “And he’s a pain in the neck, like all of them, but you still kissed him, if I caught the drift of what you were saying just now. Aren’t you rather young for that kind of thing?”

“Goodness me, no,” I said. “Far from it—I’m a late developer. *All* the girls in our class are on the pill but me.”

Well, all except Aishani, Maggie, and Cassie Clarke, but Aishani’s parents were conservative Indians and would murder Aishani if she so much as looked at a boy, Maggie fancied girls, and as for Cassie—one day I was sure those spots would go away of their own accord, and then she’d be nicer to other people and stop snapping, “What do you

think you're gawping at in that silly way?" when anyone even glanced in her direction.

"Oh, and of course Charlotte won't have anything to do with sex either. That's why Gordon Gelderman calls her the Ice Queen. But now I'm not so sure if that's really right for her. . . ." I ground my teeth, because I was thinking how Charlotte had looked at Gideon—and vice versa. If you stopped to think how quickly Gideon had thought up the idea of kissing me, on only the second day after we met, I couldn't even imagine what had been going on between him and Charlotte over all the years they'd known each other.

"What kind of pill?" asked Lucas.

"How do you mean?" Oh, my God, in the year 1948 they probably had nothing but cow-gut condoms, if that. I didn't really want to know. "Honestly, I'd rather not talk to you about sex, Grandpa."

Lucas looked at me, shaking his head. "And I'd rather not hear that word in your mouth. I don't mean *Grandpa*."

"Okay." I peeled the banana as Lucas went on making notes. "What do you say instead?"

"Instead of what?"

"Instead of sex."

"We don't talk about it," said Lucas, concentrating on his notepad. "Or anyway, not to girls of sixteen. So let's go on. The chronograph was stolen by Lucy and Paul before the blood of the last two time travelers could be read into it. Then the second chronograph came into use, but of course the blood of all the other time travelers is missing from that one."

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“Not anymore. Gideon has found nearly all of them, and they gave him some of their blood. There’s only Lady Tilney to go, and the Opal, Elise something-or-other.”

“Elaine Burghley,” said Lucas. “A lady-in-waiting at the court of Queen Elizabeth. She died in childbirth aged eighteen.”

“Right. And Lucy and Paul’s blood too, of course. So we’re after their blood, and they’re after ours. Or that’s how I understand it, anyway.”

“And now there are two chronographs which might complete the Circle? This is really incredible!”

“What will happen when the Circle is complete?”

“Then the secret will be revealed,” said Lucas solemnly.

“Oh, no, not you too!” I shook my head angrily. “Isn’t there *any* more concrete information available, just for once?”

“Well, the prophesies speak of the rise of the eagle, the victory of mankind over disease and death, and the dawn of a new age.”

“Oh,” I said, no wiser than before. “So it’s a good thing, is it?”

“A very good thing. Something of benefit to the entire human race. That’s why Count Saint-Germain founded the Society of the Guardians. That’s why the most brilliant and powerful men in the world joined our ranks. We all want to keep the secret so that it can be revealed at the right time and save the world.”

Okay. A clear statement for once. Or at least the clearest anyone had yet given me since I got mixed up in all this

mysterious secret stuff. “But why don’t Lucy and Paul want the Circle to be closed?”

Lucas sighed. “I’ve no idea. When did you say you met them?”

“In the year 1912,” I said. “June. June the twenty-second, I think. Or the twenty-fourth. I didn’t notice exactly.” The more I tried to remember, the less certain I was. “Or maybe the twelfth? It was an even number, I do remember that. The eighteenth? Anyway, sometime in the afternoon. Lady Tilney had the table laid for tea.” Then it dawned on me what I’d just said, and I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Oh, no!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Now I’ve gone and told you, and you’ll tell Lucy and Paul, and *that’s* why they can lie in wait for us there. So really *you* are the one who gives us away, not me. Mind you, I suppose it all comes to the same thing in the end.”

“What? No, no!” Lucas shook his head energetically. “I won’t do that. I won’t tell them anything at all about you—that would be crazy! If I tell them tomorrow that they’re going to steal the chronograph someday and disappear into the past with it, they’ll fall down dead of shock on the spot. You have to think very, very carefully what you’re going to tell anyone about the future, understand?”

“Well, no, maybe you won’t tell them tomorrow, but there are years and years ahead when you could do it.” I thoughtfully munched my banana. “On the other hand, what time did they travel back to with the chronograph? Why not this period? They’d always have a friend here in

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you. Maybe you're lying to me and they've been waiting right outside that door for ages to get a few drops of my blood."

"I haven't the slightest idea where they could have gone." Lucas sighed. "I can't even imagine them ever doing anything so crazy. Or why they'd do it!" He added, sounding discouraged, "I've no idea of anything at all!"

"So neither of us has any idea at this moment," I said, just as discouraged.

Lucas wrote down *Green Rider, second chronograph*, and *Lady Tilney* on his notepad, and added large question marks to all of them. "What we need is to meet again later. By then I could find out a good deal. . . ."

I had a bright idea. "Originally I was supposed to be sent to the year 1956 to elapse. Maybe we could meet again tomorrow evening."

"Ha, ha!" said Lucas. "1956 may be tomorrow to you—for me it's— But yes, let's think. If you get sent to elapse to a time after this, will it be to this room?"

I nodded. "I think so. But you can't wait for me day and night down here. What's more, Gideon could turn up anytime. After all, he has to elapse as well."

"I know what to do," said Lucas, with growing enthusiasm. "If you land in this room next time, just come up to me! My office is on the second floor. You'll only have to pass two guards, but that's no problem if you say you've lost your way. You're my cousin. My cousin Hazel from the country. I'll start telling everyone about you this very day."

“But Mr. Whitman says this room is always kept locked, and anyway I don’t know exactly where we are.”

“You’ll need a key, of course. And the password for the day.” Lucas looked around him. “I’ll get a key made for you and leave it somewhere here. Same with the password. I’ll write it on a note and leave it in our hiding place. Somewhere in the brickwork would be best. The bricks are coming a bit loose just there, see? Maybe we can make a hollow space behind them.” He got to his feet, made his way through the junk in the cellar, and knelt down in front of the wall. “Look, here. I’ll come back with tools and make a perfect hiding place. When you come back next, you just have to pull out this brick, and then you’ll find the key and the password.”

“But there are a lot of bricks,” I said.

“Just remember this one, fifth row from the bottom, roughly in the middle of the room. Damn, that was my fingernail! Never mind, that’s my plan, and I think it’s a good one.”

“But then you’d have to come down here every day from now on to change the password,” I said. “How are you going to fix that? Aren’t you studying at Oxford?”

“The password isn’t changed daily,” replied Lucas. “Sometimes we use the same one for weeks on end. Anyway, this is our only chance to fix another meeting. Remember that brick. I’ll draw a plan as well, so that you can find your way up. There are secret passages from here that go over half of London.” He looked at his watch. “Now,

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let's sit down again and make notes. Systematically. You wait, we'll both know more in the end."

"Or alternatively we'll still be two people without the faintest idea down in a musty cellar."

Lucas put his head to one side and grinned at me. "Maybe, just in passing, you could tell me whether your grandmother's name begins with an A or a C?"

I had to smile. "Which would you rather?"

THE CIRCLE OF TWELVE

NAME	GEMSTONE	ALCHEMICAL QUALITY	ANIMAL	TREE
Lancelot de Villiers 1560–1607	Amber	<i>Calcinatio</i>	Frog	Beech
Elaine Burghley 1562–1580	Opal	<i>Putrefactio et mortificio</i>	Owl	Walnut
William de Villiers 1626–1689	Agate	<i>Sublimatio</i>	Bear	Pine
Cecilia Woodville 1628–1684	Aquamarine	<i>Solutio</i>	Horse	Maple
Robert Leopold, Count Saint-Germain 1703–1784	Emerald	<i>Distillatio</i>	Eagle	Oak
Jeanne de Pointcarré, Madame d'Urfée 1705–1775	Citrine	<i>Coagulatio</i>	Snake	Ginkgo
Jonathan and Timothy de Villiers 1875–1944 1875–1930	Carnelian	<i>Extractio</i>	Falcon	Apple
Margaret Tilney 1877–1944	Jade	<i>Digestio</i>	Fox	Linden
Paul de Villiers b. 1974	Black Tourmaline	<i>Ceratio</i>	Wolf	Mountain Ash
Lucy Montrose b. 1976	Sapphire	<i>Fermentatio</i>	Lynx	Willow
Gideon de Villiers b. 1992	Diamond	<i>Multiplicatio</i>	Lion	Yew
Gwyneth Shepherd b. 1994	Ruby	<i>Projectio</i>	Raven	Birch

F O U R



“GWENNY! GWENNY, wake up!”

With difficulty, I struggled up from the depths of my dream. In the dream I’d been an ancient, hunchbacked old woman sitting opposite Gideon, who was looking terrific, and claiming that my name was Gwyneth Shepherd and I came from the year 2080. Now I looked into the familiar, snub-nosed face of my little sister, Caroline.

“At last!” she said. “I thought I’d never get you to wake up. I was asleep when you came in yesterday evening, though I tried so hard to stay awake. Have you brought one of those gorgeous dresses back again?”

“Not this time.” I sat up. “I was able to change when I got there.”

“Is it always going to be like this? You not coming home until I’m asleep? Mum has been so odd since this happened to you. And Nick and I miss you. Suppers don’t seem right when you’re not there.”

“They didn’t seem right before,” I reassured her, dropping back on the pillow.

A limousine had brought me back yesterday evening. I didn’t know the chauffeur, but redheaded Mr. Marley had come all the way to the front door of our house with me.

I hadn’t seen Gideon again, and just as well. It was quite enough to dream of him all night.

My grandmother’s butler, Mr. Bernard, had let me in, polite and otherwise totally impassive, as ever. My mum had come downstairs to welcome me home, hugging me as tightly as if I’d just come back from an expedition to the South Pole. I was glad to see her, too, although I was still rather cross with her. It was so odd, finding out that your own mother had been lying to you. And she still wouldn’t tell me why. Apart from a few cryptic remarks—*trust no one . . . dangerous . . . secret . . . blah blah blah*—she hadn’t told me anything to explain her behavior. So what with that and the fact that I was just about dying of exhaustion, I’d simply eaten a small piece of roast chicken and then fallen into bed without telling Mum about the day’s events. And what exactly was she going to do with the information? She worried far too much anyway. I thought she looked almost as exhausted as me.

Caroline shook my arm again. “Hey, don’t go back to sleep!”

“Okay.” I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and realized that, in spite of my long phone call to Lesley before I went to sleep, I did feel fairly well rested. But where

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was Xemerius? He'd disappeared when I went into the bathroom last night, and I hadn't seen him since.

Under the shower, I finally washed my hair, using Mum's expensive shampoo, which wasn't really allowed, and some of her conditioner as well, even at the risk of being given away by the wonderful scent of roses and grapefruit. As I rubbed my head dry, I instinctively wondered whether Gideon liked roses and grapefruit and then called myself sternly to order.

I'd hardly had a couple of hours' sleep, and here I was thinking of *him* again! And just what was so great about what had happened anyway? We'd done a bit of necking in the confessional, but right after that, he'd gone back to being his old insufferable self, and my fall from cloud nine was not something I wanted to remember, whether or not I'd had enough sleep. As I'd told Lesley when she wouldn't drop the subject last night.

I blow-dried my hair, got dressed, and went down all the flights of stairs to the dining room. Caroline, Nick, Mum, and I lived on the third floor of our house. Unlike the rest of the place, which had been in my family's hands since the beginning of time (or even longer), it was at least reasonably comfortable.

The rest of the house was stuffed with antique furniture and pictures of assorted ancestors, few of whom were exactly a sight for sore eyes. And we had a ballroom where I had helped Nick learn how to ride a bike—in secret, of course, but these days traffic in central London was terribly dangerous, as everyone knew.

As so often, I wished Mum and the three of us could eat up on the third floor, where we had our own rooms, but my grandmother, Lady Arista, insisted on all of us meeting at mealtimes in the gloomy dining room. Its paneling was the color of milk chocolate; at least, that was the only nice comparison I'd ever thought of. The others were less appetizing.

Today the atmosphere was distinctly better than the day before, as I noticed the moment I came into the room. Well, that was something, anyway.

Lady Arista, who always seemed rather like a ballet teacher about to rap you over the knuckles, said "good morning" in friendly tones, and Charlotte and her mother smiled at me as if they knew something and I hadn't the faintest idea of it.

Since Aunt Glenda never normally smiled at anyone (unless you count a sort of sour lift at the corners of her mouth), and Charlotte had said some horrible things to me only yesterday, I immediately felt suspicious.

"Has something happened?" I asked.

My twelve-year-old brother Nick grinned at me as I sat down beside Caroline, and Mum pushed a huge plateful of scrambled egg on toast over to me. I almost fainted away with hunger as the delicious smell rose to my nostrils.

"Oh, my goodness," said Aunt Glenda. "I suppose you want your daughter consuming a whole month's supply of fat and cholesterol in a single day, do you, Grace?"

"That's right," said Mum, unfazed.

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“She’ll hate you later for not taking better care of her figure,” said Aunt Glenda, smiling again.

“Gwyneth’s figure is faultless,” said Mum.

“For now—maybe,” said Aunt Glenda. She was still smiling.

“Did you two put something in Aunt Glenda’s tea?” I asked Caroline in a whisper.

“Someone phoned a few minutes ago, and ever since then Aunt Glenda and Charlotte have been on top of the world,” Caroline whispered back. “You’d think someone had cast a magic spell over them.”

At that moment, Xemerius landed on the windowsill outside, folded his wings, and came in through the glass of the windowpane.

“Good morning,” I said cheerfully.

“Good morning,” replied Xemerius, hopping down from the windowsill and up on an empty chair.

While the others looked at me, rather surprised, Xemerius scratched his belly. “Yours is rather a large family. I haven’t quite managed to get the hang of it yet, but I did notice there are a lot of women about the place. Too many, if you ask me. And most of the time, half of them look like they need a good tickling.” He shook out his wings. “Where are the fathers of all these children? And where are the pets? A great big house like this, and not so much as a canary! I’m disappointed.”

I grinned. “Where’s Great-aunt Maddy?” I asked as I happily began to eat.

"I am afraid my dear sister-in-law's need for sleep is greater than her curiosity," said Lady Arista, with dignity. She was sitting ramrod straight at the breakfast table, eating half a slice of buttered toast with her fingers delicately spread. (I'd hardly ever seen her anything but ramrod straight.) "Getting up so early yesterday left her in a bad temper all day long. I don't think we'll see her before ten this morning."

"Glad to hear it," said Aunt Glenda. "All that talk of sapphire eggs and clocks on towers really gets on my nerves. Well, how are you feeling, Gwyneth? I imagine this must all be very confusing for you."

"Hm," I murmured.

"It must be so dreadful, finding out all of a sudden that you're born to higher things when you can't live up to expectations." Aunt Glenda forked up a small piece of tomato from her plate.

"Mr. George says Gwyneth has acquitted herself very well so far," said Lady Arista, although before I could feel cheered by this evidence of solidarity she added, "In the circumstances, anyway. Gwyneth, you'll be fetched from school again today and taken to the Temple. This time Charlotte will go with you." She sipped her tea.

I couldn't open my mouth without letting scrambled egg drop out, so I just gawped at her in alarm, while Nick and Caroline spoke for me. "Why?"

"Because," said Aunt Glenda, wagging her head in a peculiar way, "because Charlotte knows all the things that

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Gwyneth ought to know if she's to do any kind of justice to her task. So on account of the chaotic events of the last few days—and as I'm sure we can all imagine only too vividly, they must indeed have been chaotic—the Guardians want Charlotte to help her cousin prepare for the rest of her time traveling." She looked as if her daughter had just won an Olympic gold medal. At the very least.

The rest of my time traveling? What was this all about?

"Who's that skinny, redheaded battle-ax with the sharp tongue?" inquired Xemerius. "I hope for your sake she's only a distant relation."

"Not that the request surprised us, but all the same we did wonder whether to go along with it. After all, Charlotte really has no kind of obligation to them now. However," and here the skinny, redheaded battle—er, Aunt Glenda—sighed theatrically, "Charlotte is also fully aware of the importance of this mission, so she is unselfishly ready to do what she can to contribute to its success."

My mother also sighed, and gave me a sympathetic glance. Charlotte tucked a strand of her glossy red hair back behind her ear and batted her eyelashes in my direction.

"What?" said Nick. "So what's Charlotte supposed to be teaching Gwenny to do?"

"Oh, my word!" said Aunt Glenda, her cheeks flushing red with emotion. "There's a very great deal she should be taught, but it would be absurd to think that in such a short time Gwyneth can catch up with all the skills Charlotte has acquired over many years, not to mention the . . . er,

unequal distribution of natural talents in this case. In particular, Gwyneth's lack of general knowledge is positively disastrous, and she has no idea of the good manners appropriate to various historical periods—or so I have heard.”

What a nerve! And who was she supposed to have heard it from?

“Yes, and a person really needs to mind her manners, sitting around for hours alone in a locked cellar,” I said. “I mean, a woodlouse might see her picking her nose.”

Caroline giggled.

“Oh, no, Gwenny, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but it's going to be just a *little* bit trickier for you in the near future.” Charlotte gave me what was probably meant to be a sympathetic look, but it came across as nasty and gloating.

“Your cousin is right.” I'd always been a bit afraid of Lady Arista's penetrating gaze, but this time it really made me jump. “On orders from the highest places, you will be spending a good deal of time in the eighteenth century,” she said.

“And in company,” added Charlotte, “with people who would think it very odd if you didn't even know the name of the king on the throne or what a reticule is.”

A reti-what?

“What's a reticule?” asked Caroline.

Charlotte gave her a thin smile. “Get your sister to tell you.”

I stared crossly at her. Why did she always get so much pleasure out of making me look stupid and ignorant? Aunt Glenda laughed quietly.

“Kind of a silly handbag, usually full of stuff that no one needs,” said Xemerius. “Sewing things. And handkerchiefs. And little bottles of smelling salts.”

Aha!

“A reticule is an old-fashioned word for a handbag, Caroline,” I said, without taking my eyes off Charlotte. She blinked in surprise, but she kept the thin smile going.

“Orders from the highest places? What’s that supposed to mean?” My mother had turned to Lady Arista. “I thought we agreed that Gwyneth would be kept out of the whole thing as far as possible. She was only going to be sent to safe years to elapse. How can they change their minds now and decide to expose her to such danger?”

“It’s none of your business, Grace,” said my grandmother coolly. “You have done enough damage as it is.”

My mother bit her lower lip. Her angry glance went once from me to Lady Arista and back, and then she pushed back her chair and stood up. “I must start for work,” she said. She dropped a kiss on Nick’s head and looked over the table at Caroline and me. “Have fun at school. Caroline, don’t forget to brush your hair before you go. See you later.”

“Poor Mum,” whispered Caroline as my mother left the room. “She was crying yesterday evening. I don’t think she likes it one little bit that you’ve inherited this time-travel gene.”

“No,” I agreed. “I’d noticed.”

“And she’s not the only one,” said Nick, with a meaningful look at Aunt Glenda and Charlotte, who was still smiling.

* * *

I'D NEVER ATTRACTED as much attention on walking into the classroom before. That was because half the kids there had seen me being fetched in a black limousine yesterday afternoon.

"The betting's still open," said Gordon Gelderman. "Top odds on possibility number one: that cool-looking guy yesterday, the gay one, is a TV producer, and he was auditioning Charlotte and Gwyneth for a show, but Gwyneth won the part. Possibility number two: the guy is your gay cousin, and he runs a limo service. Possibility number three—"

"Oh, shut up, Gordon!" spat Charlotte, tossing her hair back and sitting down.

"Charlotte, couldn't you explain how come you were necking with the guy but then Gwyneth got into the car with him?" asked Cynthia Dale in a wheedling tone of voice. "Lesley's been trying to make out he's a teacher giving Gwyneth private coaching after school."

"Yes, and a teacher giving coaching is likely to turn up in a limousine and hold hands with our Ice Queen, right?" said Gordon, giving Lesley a nasty look. "That's pathetic as a cover-up, if you ask me."

Lesley shrugged her shoulders and grinned at me. "Couldn't think of anything better in a hurry." She sat down in her usual place.

I looked around for Xemerius. Last time I'd seen him, he was perched on the school roof, waving cheerfully down at me. He did have instructions to keep away from

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me during classes, but I didn't think he was likely to follow them.

"The Green Rider looks like a dead end," said Lesley under her breath. Unlike me, she hadn't had much sleep last night. She'd spent hours on the Internet again. "A famous jade figurine from the Ming Dynasty goes by that name, but it's in a museum in Beijing, and there's a statue of a Green Rider in the marketplace of a German town called Cloppenburg, and it's the title of two books—one a novel published in 1926, and the other a children's book that wasn't written until after your grandfather's death. That's all so far."

"I thought it might be a painting," I said. Secrets always get hidden behind or in paintings in films.

"No such luck," said Lesley. "If it had been a Blue Rider, well, that would be different, but it isn't. Then I hunted THE GREEN RIDER through an anagram-making site. But . . . well, unless DITHER GREENER means anything, no luck there either. I printed out a few. Anything ring a bell with you?" She handed me a sheet of paper.

"DEER THREE GRIN," I read out. "ERRED HERE TING. Let me think for a moment. . . ."

Lesley giggled. "My favorite is REGRET HEN RIDE. Hang on, here comes Mr. Squirrel."

She meant Mr. Whitman, of course. At the time we nicknamed him that, we had no idea who he really was.

"I keep expecting us to be called to see the principal and told off because of yesterday," I said, but Lesley shook her head.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Do you think he wants Mr. Gilles knowing his English and history teacher is an important member of a terribly secret secret society? Because that’s what I’d say if he told on us. Oh, shit, here he comes. And looking so . . . so supercilious again!”

In fact, Mr. Whitman did come over to us. He put the fat folder that he’d confiscated in the girls’ toilets yesterday down in front of Lesley. “I thought you might like to have this . . . very interesting collection of papers back,” he said, with a touch of sarcasm.

“Oh, thank you!” replied Lesley, going a little red in the face. The *collection of papers* was her big file of research into time-travel phenomena. It contained absolutely everything that the two of us (but mainly Lesley, of course) had found out so far about the Guardians and Count Saint-Germain. On page thirty-four, just after all the entries on the subject of telekinesis, there was a note about Mr. Whitman himself. *Squirrel also member of the Lodge? Ring, meaning of?* We could only hope that Mr. Whitman hadn’t jumped to the connection with him.

“Lesley, I don’t like to say this, but I think your energy could be better invested in some of your school subjects.” Mr. Whitman was smiling, but there was something other than just sarcasm in his voice. He lowered it. “Not everything that seems interesting is necessarily good for you.”

Was that by any chance a threat? Lesley picked up the folder in silence and put it away in her school bag.

The others were looking at us curiously. Obviously they were wondering what Mr. Whitman was talking about.

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Charlotte was sitting close enough to hear him, and she definitely had a gloating expression on her face. When Mr. Whitman said, “And, Gwyneth, by now you should be beginning to understand that discretion is not only desirable but essential,” she nodded in agreement. “It is a pity that you are turning out to be so *unworthy*.”

How unfair! I decided to follow Lesley’s example, and Mr. Whitman and I stared at each other for a few seconds in silence. Then his smile grew wider, and he suddenly patted my cheek. “Chin up! I’m sure there’s still a lot you’ll be able to learn,” he said as he moved on. “Now, then, Gordon, is your essay copied from the Internet again lock, stock, and barrel?”

“You’re always telling us to use all the sources we can find,” Gordon defended himself. His voice covered two octaves from bass to squeaky treble in the process.

“What was Whitman saying to you two?” Cynthia Dale leaned back and looked at us. “What was that folder? And why did he *stroke* you, Gwyneth?”

“No need to be jealous, Cyn,” said Lesley. “He doesn’t like us a bit better than he likes you.”

“I’m not jealous,” said Cynthia. “I mean, *hello* . . . why does everyone think I’m in love with the man?”

“Maybe because you’re president of the William Whitman Fan Club?” I suggested.

“Or because you’ve been seen writing *Cynthia Whitman* twenty times on a piece of paper, saying you wanted to find out what it felt like?” said Lesley.

“Or because—”

“Okay, stop that,” hissed Cynthia. “Anyway, it was only once, and it was ages ago.”

“It was the day before yesterday,” said Lesley.

“I’m more mature and adult now.” Cynthia sighed and looked around the class. “It’s all because of the boys—stupid, overgrown babies! If only we had reasonably sensible boys in this class, no one would need to fancy one of the teachers. By the way—tell us about the cool guy who picked you up in the limousine yesterday, will you, Gwenny? Is there something going on between you?”

Charlotte let out a snort of amusement, which instantly attracted Cynthia’s attention. “Oh, don’t keep us on tenterhooks, Charlotte. Do you have something going with him, or does Gwenny?”

By now Mr. Whitman was behind his desk, telling us to put our minds to Shakespeare and his sonnets.

For once I was truly grateful to him. Better Shakespeare than Gideon! The chatter died down around us, giving way to sighs and the rustling of paper. But I did hear Charlotte saying, “Well, certainly not Gwenny.”

Lesley looked at me sympathetically. “She has no idea,” she whispered to me. “Really, you can only feel sorry for her.”

“Yes, right,” I whispered back. But in fact I was sorry for no one but myself. I could see that an afternoon in Charlotte’s company was going to be a whole load of fun.

THIS TIME the limousine wasn’t waiting at the school gates, but parked discreetly a little way down the street.

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Red-haired Mr. Marley was pacing nervously up and down beside it. He got even more nervous when he saw us coming.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Charlotte, very obviously displeased, and Mr. Marley blushed. Charlotte took a look through the open door at the interior of the limousine. It was empty except for the driver—and Xemerius. Charlotte looked disappointed. That gave me a real boost.

“Did you miss me?” Xemerius sprawled contentedly in his seat as the car purred away. Mr. Marley was sitting in the front, and Charlotte, beside me, was staring out of the window in silence.

“Glad to hear it,” said Xemerius, without waiting for an answer. “But I’m sure you realize I have other duties too. I can’t be looking after you the whole time.”

I rolled my eyes, and Xemerius giggled.

In fact I really had missed him. Classes had dragged on slowly, and by the time Mrs. Counter was going on forever about the mineral resources of the Baltic states, if not sooner, I’d been longing for Xemerius and his comments. Also I’d have liked to introduce him to Lesley, so far as that was possible. Lesley loved listening to my descriptions, even though my attempts to draw the gargoyle demon for her hadn’t turned out very flattering. “What are those clothes-pegs for?” she had asked, pointing to the horns on his head.

“At last!” she said enthusiastically. “An invisible friend who might come in useful! Think about it: unlike James, who just stands about in his niche doing nothing but

complaining of your bad manners, this gargoyle can go around spying for you, *and* he can tell you what goes on behind closed doors.”

That hadn't occurred to me before. But it was true—over that business this morning with the reti . . . reti-thingy . . . the old word for a handbag, Xemerius had definitely made himself useful.

“You could have an ace up your sleeve with Xemerius” was Lesley's opinion. “Not just a useless ghost always taking offense like James.”

I'm afraid she was right there. James was—yes, what exactly was he? If he had rattled chains or made chandeliers swing, he could have been officially described as our school ghost. But the Honorable James Augustus Peregrine Pympoole-Bothame was a handsome young man aged about twenty who wore a powdered white wig and a flowered coat, and he had been dead for 229 years. The school had once been his parents' house, and like most ghosts, he couldn't understand that he had died. As he saw it, the centuries of his life as a ghost were just a strange dream, and he was still expecting to wake up. Lesley suspected he had simply slept through the part of dying where you see a bright light at the end of a tunnel and go toward it.

“James isn't totally useless,” I had objected. After all, only yesterday I'd decided that as a child of the eighteenth century, he could be genuinely useful to me, for instance as a fencing teacher. For a few hours, I'd reveled in the fantasy of being as good with a sword as Gideon, thanks to James. Unfortunately I'd made a big mistake there.

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Our first (and probably last) fencing lesson just now, in the empty classroom at lunchtime, had left Lesley rolling about the floor in fits of laughter. Of course she couldn't see James's movements, which looked to me very professional, or hear his instructions—"Parry, Miss Gwyneth, just parry! Tierce! Prime! Quint!" She'd only seen me waving Mrs. Counter's pointer desperately about in the air, fending off an invisible sword that could be sliced through like thin air. Useless. And ridiculous.

When Lesley had quite finished laughing, she said she thought James had better teach me something else, and for once James himself agreed with her. Fencing and all other kinds of fighting were a man's business, he said. In his opinion, embroidery needles were the most dangerous weapons a girl ought to pick up.

"I guess the world would be a better place if men stuck to the same rule," Lesley had said. "But as long as they don't, women ought to be prepared." And James had almost fainted away when she produced a knife with a seven-inch blade from her school bag. "So you can defend yourself better if another of those unpleasant lowlife characters in the past is out to get you."

"That looks like a—"

"Japanese kitchen knife, yes. Slices through vegetables and raw fish like butter."

I'd felt a shiver running down my spine.

"Only for emergencies," Lesley had added. "To help you feel a little safer. It was the best weapon I could get in a hurry without a license."

The knife was now in my school bag, in Lesley's mum's old spectacle case converted into a sheath, along with a roll of tape that, if Lesley was to be believed, would also come in useful.

The driver swung around a bend, and Xemerius, who hadn't been holding on tight, went slithering over the smooth leather upholstery to collide with Charlotte. He hastily scrambled up again.

"Rigid as a church column," he remarked, shaking his wings. He inspected her sideways. "Are we going to be lumbered with her all day now?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Yes unfortunately what?" asked Charlotte.

"Unfortunately I skipped lunch again," I said.

"Your own fault," replied Charlotte. "Although to be honest, it won't hurt you to lose a few pounds. After all, you'll have to fit into the clothes that Madame Rossini made for me." She tightened her lips for a moment, and I felt something like pity. She'd probably been genuinely pleased by the prospect of wearing Madame Rossini's costumes, and then I came along to spoil everything. Not on purpose, of course, but all the same. . . .

"The dress I had to put on for visiting Count Saint-Germain is in my wardrobe at home," I said. "I'll give it to you if you like. You could wear it to Cynthia's next fancy-dress party—I bet you'd bowl everyone over!"

"That dress isn't yours to give away," said Charlotte brusquely. "It's the property of the Guardians. And it has

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no business being in your wardrobe at home.” She went back to looking out of the window.

“Grouse, grouse, grouse,” said Xemerius.

Charlotte really didn’t make it easy for you to like her. She never had. All the same, I hated this frosty atmosphere. I tried again. “Charlotte—”

“We’re nearly there,” she interrupted me. “I can’t wait to see if we’ll meet any of the Inner Circle.” Her grumpy face suddenly brightened. “I mean apart from those we know already. It’s so exciting! Over the next few days the Temple will be teeming with living legends. Famous politicians, Nobel Prize winners, highly decorated scientists will be in its hallowed halls, and the rest of the world will never know. Koppe Jötland will be here, oh, and Jonathan Reeves-Haviland . . . how I’d love to shake hands with him.” For her, Charlotte sounded really enthusiastic.

I had no idea who she was talking about. I looked hopefully at Xemerius, but he simply shrugged his shoulders. “Never heard of any of those stuffed shirts, sorry,” he said.

“No one can know everything,” I said with an understanding smile.

Charlotte sighed. “No, but it doesn’t hurt to read a serious newspaper now and then, or look at a news magazine to inform yourself about international political events. Of course, you have to switch your brain into gear for that . . . always supposing you have one.”

Like I said, she really didn’t make it easy.

The limousine had stopped, and Mr. Marley opened the car door. On Charlotte's side, I noticed.

"Mr. Giordano is expecting you in the Old Refectory," said Mr. Marley, and I had a feeling he'd almost added "ma'am." He continued, "I'm to take you there."

"There's something about you that makes everyone want to order you around," observed Xemerius. "Like me to come with you?"

"Yes, please," I said, as we made our way along the narrow alleyways of the Temple district. "I'd feel better with you there."

"Will you buy me a dog?"

"No!"

"But you do like me, don't you? I think I'll have to make myself scarce more often."

"Or make yourself useful," I said, remembering what Lesley had said. *You could have an ace up your sleeve with Xemerius.* She was right. Who else had a friend who could walk through walls?

"Don't dawdle like that," said Charlotte. She and Mr. Marley were a few feet in front of us, walking side by side, and only now did it strike me how like each other they were.

"Yes, Miss Manners," I said.



Let's withdraw; And meet the time as it seeks us.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
THE TRAGEDY OF CYMBELINE