

*Adventures in Zandria*

CHRISTINE NORRIS



The  
Talisman  
of  
Zandria

**Tales of Zandria Book 1**

# **The Talisman of Zandria**



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**ZUNAYA THRESHOLDS**

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THE TALISMAN OF ZANDRIA

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*In memory of Uncle John,  
who taught me the best way  
to do anything was to throw  
out the instructions and just  
do it*

# Chapter 1



Ivy Peterson was not ordinary. She wasn't extraordinary or unusual, either. Ivy Peterson was, in her educated opinion, Less-than-Ordinary.

If she was in a crowd of other eleven-year-olds, for example, she would not stand out. Her hair was not blond, or naturally curly, but the exact, boring shade of a field mouse. Her brown eyes were not the color of chocolate or brownies or coffee; they were just brown. She was neither tall nor short. There were some small freckles sprinkled across her nose, but even they did nothing to pull her up to Ordinary status. Ivy was so very Less-than-Ordinary it made her invisible.

She sat in her seat in social studies class, which was neither at the front or the back, and listened to Miss Litvack, her teacher, talk about the Revolutionary War.

"In what year was the Declaration of Independence signed?"

Two students raised their hands, but Miss Litvack's attention moved right over Ivy as if she wasn't even there.

"Jodi." The teacher pointed to Jodi Applethorpe, a girl in the back row.

Ivy put her hand down slowly. Why had she even bothered? Her teachers never called on her, even when she raised her hand, which she almost never did although she usually knew the answer. Besides being Less-than-Ordinary, she was also Not-Very-Brave. Which was a terrible obstacle when it came to making friends. She didn't have the courage to approach someone she hardly knew and start up a conversation. She had tried, but when it came time to say hello, her tongue tied into knots, breathing became difficult, and she ended up stuttering and spluttering and, finally, running away.

Ivy wished she wasn't Less-than-Ordinary. She wished she were More than Brave. There were days when she wished, more than anything, that something Very Extraordinary or Completely Unusual would happen to her.



Although the sun shone brightly overhead, the October air was chilly. The leaves on the trees had turned to bright orange, yellow and red, as if they were on fire. More fell by the day, littering the ground, and Ivy's father, as he did every year, grumbled as he raked them into piles that Sunday morning then spent Sunday afternoon complaining of a backache.

After school on Monday, Ivy went out into the yard and leaped into the largest leaf pile, rooting around until she was completely covered. It was one of her favorite things about fall, being able to

hide in a cocoon of red and gold leaves where she could hide and think. Her father would have been furious if he'd seen her, because her leaf-pile hideaway always ended up scattered all over the yard. So, Ivy was always careful to rake them back into a neat pile again before he got home from work.

She lay tucked inside the pile, breathing in the scent of moldy leaves and thinking. Well, really, she was doing more worrying than thinking. She was worrying about her next math test, although math was her best subject. She was running numbers through her head when she heard a strange sound.

She sat straight up, destroying the leaf pile, and listened very carefully. Had she imagined it? Then, after a moment, she heard the noise again. It was like a tiny bell, but there was something odd about it.

The sound, if her ears were working properly, had come from the woods that bordered her back yard. She stood, brushing the leaves from her jeans and picking them from her hair, and crept toward the woods. She stopped on the very edge, barely breathing so she could listen. She heard it again.

*I'm being silly. It's probably just Squiggles.*

Her neighbor, Mrs. Horowitz, had a fat white cat who was always escaping. He wore a bell on his fluffy pink collar. No one had bothered to ask Ivy her opinion, but she thought maybe the reason Mr. Squiggles kept running away was because Mrs. Horowitz made him wear a fluffy pink collar and talked to him as if he were a baby.

But that wasn't any of her business.

She didn't hear the sound again so started to turn, ready to clean up her demolished leaf pile. Something bright caught her eye, and she stopped.

It looked like a star had fallen from the sky and decided to fly around the woods. The bell sound seemed to belong to it.

*That is definitely not a cat.*

Ivy stepped closer, almost onto the path through the woods. She watched without moving as the tiny bluish-white light disappeared for a second then came back into view, moving fast. It headed straight for her, growing larger as it approached.

The Not-Very-Brave inside Ivy screamed for her to run, but she managed to keep her feet still. The light, about the size of a volleyball, flew around her head. It stopped in front of her face.

Ivy gasped. The light surrounded a little *person*. She—it looked like a she—was about ten inches long, with blond hair. She wore a tiny royal blue tunic that went to her knees and looked like someone had glued a butterfly to her back. When the wings fluttered, they made the sound she had thought was Squiggle's bell.

The creature looked at Ivy, curiosity in her big, blue eyes.

"Um, uh..." Ivy couldn't believe she was afraid to talk to something so small. She had no trouble talking to animals, probably because they didn't talk back, but this looked like a person and so her tongue was being stubborn.

She wondered if she *could* talk back.

*What if I pretend I'm talking to a great big butterfly?*

Even though a butterfly is technically an insect and not an animal, it did the trick.

"Hello, there, little...thing. You're so pretty." Ivy reached up slowly so she didn't scare her.

The butterfly-girl shot down the path and out of sight. Ivy took two steps into the woods, ready to chase after her, but her mother's call stopped her.

"Ivy, time for supper. Come in and wash up."

When Ivy looked back at the woods, the butterfly-girl was gone. With a disappointed sigh, she ran to the house. Her mother waited on the back steps.

"What were you doing?"

"I was...nothing. I thought I heard Squiggles in the woods." Her mother wouldn't believe her if she told the truth anyway. Ivy scarcely believed it herself, and she had been there.

"Your father is *not* going to be happy when he sees what you've done to that leaf pile, you know."

"I'll clean it up after dinner, Mom, I promise."



Ivy lay in bed that night unable to sleep, thoughts of the butterfly girl in the woods whirring through her mind. The little creature seemed curiously familiar, but how could she be? Ivy would have remembered seeing something like that before.

*Wait, I know! So stupid, how could I have forgotten?*

She tiptoed across the room to the bookshelf and pulled down a book she hadn't opened in many years. In the glow of the night light, she studied the cover. It reminded her of happier days, before she had become Less-than-Ordinary. A book of fairy tales. When she was little, her mother had read them to her over and over, making up voices for all the characters and adding sound effects.

The memory made her smile, but at the same time she felt a little sad. Those days of reading with her mom seemed like another life, lived by two other people who were not Less-than-Ordinary and Far-Too-Busy.

Before her mother and father had become important people with important things to do and Far-Too-

Busy, the three of them had done a lot of things together, like go for walks in the woods, and to the park, and to the beach. Her parents loved her, she knew, because they said so every morning as they rushed out the door and kissed her on top of the head.

But they *were* important people with important things to do. Ivy had the sneaking suspicion they were embarrassed to have a daughter who was Less-than-Ordinary.

Ivy searched through the worn pages until she found the picture of the creature she had seen that afternoon. She stared at it until she fell asleep with the book against her chest.

## Chapter 2



All the next day, Ivy paid no attention in any of her classes; her teachers didn't notice. There was so much for her to think about.

For a little while, she wasn't positive she hadn't imagined the whole thing. But that was silly. Of all the things to imagine, why would she dream up a fairy? After research in both the book of fairy tales and on the internet this morning, she was certain the little creature *was* a fairy, and not a butterfly-girl.

No, she decided, it had definitely been real.

There was something that bothered her, though. She was too old to believe in fairies. Wasn't there some rule that once she was over the age of, say, nine, belief in fairies and magic wasn't allowed? Maybe she was cracking up.

It didn't matter. She knew what she had seen; she only had to figure out what to do about it. Tell someone? There was no one to tell. Even if she could get her parents' attention for five minutes, they wouldn't be-

lieve her. She had no friends, and there was absolutely no way the first thing she said to one of her classmates was that she had seen a fairy. Just thinking about the result made her stomach churn.

No, she was on her own. Like always.

So, she made a simple plan and promised herself she would follow it that day before she lost her nerve.

After school, Ivy walked home with a group of children who lived in her neighborhood. Two dark-haired boys tossed a backpack back and forth. Justin and Jonathan were their names, twin brothers who lived next door to Ivy. The backpack was not theirs; it belonged to Lori, who lived across the street. She ran between the boys, begging.

"It's mine, give it back. Come on, you guys, I mean it." She turned suddenly and ran right into Ivy. They tumbled to the ground.

"Omigosh, I'm sorry." Lori helped Ivy to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"It's okay," Ivy mumbled, struggling against the Not-Very-Brave part of herself.

"Hey, do I know you?" Lori tilted her head. "Are you in my class?"

Before Ivy could even nod her head, the other girl ran off after the boys. Ivy sighed deeply and followed them until she came to her own doorstep. *Invisible Ivy*.

Usually, she would have started her homework right away, but today, she dropped her books on the living room sofa, picked up the apple her mother had left on the kitchen counter for her after-school snack and went straight out the back door.

The woods were dark and thick. A path cut between the trees, winding from the back yard to the playground at the school. Her parents had warned

her never to take the path because they didn't want her to get lost. They promised that when she was older she could use it to get to and from school, but they had never said *how* much older. The subject had never come up again.

Ivy stood in the same place she had been the day before. Her plan was to search the woods looking for the fairy. It was a simple plan, but she stood with one foot on the path, her hands shaking.

It was mostly fear, of course, since she was Not-Very-Brave and was about to do something that might be considered Daring. But the fear was mixed up with a little bit of excitement.

She had never disobeyed her parents before. They gave her so few rules—brush your teeth, do your homework, pick up your room—it wasn't hard to be obedient. She never went out anywhere, so they had never had a curfew discussion.

*The rule about the woods is an old one*, she told herself. *I'm not a baby.*

She looked back at her empty house. What would her parents say if they found out she had broken this rule made years and years ago? How mad could they get?

Something in the trees made a noise; she startled. Okay, so maybe she was a *little* afraid of the woods.

She debated for five whole minutes whether this plan was really a good idea.

"Look, either you're going to do this or you're not," she said, trying to talk herself into an Act of Bravery. In the end, though, Curiosity won, and she stepped onto the path.

The forest was dim, with only small shafts of sunlight able to spear through the dense canopy of leaves and branches. She crept along, searching for

the fairy's light, keeping strictly to the main path and ignoring the smaller ones she discovered. The last thing she wanted was to get lost. When one is Not-Very-Brave, one tends to also be Practical.

In the muffled quiet, the sound of branches breaking was like firecrackers. Ivy stopped to listen, holding her breath. Something moved again, closer. A pair of squirrels burst from the bushes, ran across the path, around in a circle, and back into the woods.

"There is nothing here to be afraid of." Her voice did not sound as if she were convinced.

Ivy kept walking. And walking. And walking. She saw three deer, about a million more squirrels, one fox, and an unruly woodchuck. Five minutes later, she emerged into the schoolyard.

"Well, this was a complete waste of time." She tilted her head back and sighed. She had gone to all the trouble of breaking a rule, had bravely walked through the dark woods, and all she had to show for it was sore legs.

She shuffled to one of the benches on the playground and plopped onto it. The schoolyard was deserted, and the sun was low. She needed to start back if she wanted to make it to the house before her mother got home from work. Ivy dragged herself up and turned back to the path.

The shadows in the woods were deeper than before. Soon, it would be too dark to see. The Not-Very-Brave part of her decided it would be better to go around. Although it would take longer, which her legs were not happy about, she would be on well-lit and familiar streets.

She headed toward the front of the school, wondering if she should try to find the fairy again tomorrow. When she rounded the corner of the building she stopped, her breath freezing in her throat.

Three older boys stood directly in her path. Ivy knew them, although she wished she didn't—Bernie MacNamara, Howard Slack and Angelo Giordano, seventh graders whose favorite pastime was pushing younger and smaller people around. Most of the time they ignored her, like everyone else did, but there was no chance of that today if they saw her now.

Fortunately, their backs were to her. She crept back around the wall, her stomach churning.

The boys were blocking her path to the street. There was no way they wouldn't see her. She looked back at the woods. They were dark enough she was afraid of getting lost. Not-Very-Brave transformed, like a caterpillar, into Panic. She couldn't decide what to do, and she was so afraid her body felt like it was made of stone.

She stayed put and hoped the bullies would leave. The minutes ticked by, each one like an hour. When she couldn't hear the boys anymore, she counted to a hundred before peeking out.

They were gone.

She forced herself to step around the wall and run toward the street. Just steps away from freedom, a shadow fell across the pavement.

"Look what we have here, guys."

It was Bernie. He and the others had popped out of nowhere. He towered over Ivy, his upper lip curled in a sneer as he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his friends. The three of them formed a human wall.

"It's a wittle baby."

Spit flew out of Angelo's mouth when he talked, landing on Howard's jacket.

“What are you doing out here all alone, baby?” Howard cracked his knuckles. “Your mommy and daddy know where you are?”

Ivy stepped backward—one, two, three steps—before she turned and ran as fast as her legs would carry her.

“Come back here, you baby,” one of them shouted, as footsteps beat on the pavement behind her.

She ran through the playground, the three bullies on her heels. There was only one place to go, and with the fear of being caught nipping at her heels, she ran straight into the dark forest without a thought. She rocketed along the barely visible path, glancing over her shoulder just once. Angelo, Bernie and Howard were still there, and they were gaining.

Ivy turned onto one of the side paths, giving no thought where she was going except that it was away from the bullies. She darted behind a tree and pressed against the trunk, hoping the dark and the trees would hide her. Clutching at a stitch in her side, she bent over, waiting for her heart to stop pounding. Her own breath was so loud she couldn’t tell if they were still chasing her, although she listened hard.

Finally, she got up the courage to peer around the tree and into the woods. She didn’t see anyone. *Thank goodness.* Her breath whooshed out in relief. Now maybe she could get home, although her chances of making it there before her mother were almost none.

She looked around for the path, and her heart began to race again. She had no idea where she was.

*Just relax. The best thing to do is go back the way I came. Eventually, I’ll find the main path, right? How big could these woods be?*

Easy for *her* to say? Whoever the voice of the Rational Girl in her head belonged to, she obviously had not gotten the memo that Ivy was Not-Very-Brave.

Ivy started walking, which was harder to do than it sounded because she kept running into and tripping over things in the dark. Something moved in the bushes, close by. She froze. Whatever it was grunted. If it was an animal, it was a very large one.

The Not-Very-Brave part of Ivy had no desire whatsoever to see what kind of creature belonged to that sound, and she shoved Rational Girl out of the way as she ran blindly in the other direction.

A flash of lightning lit up the woods. All Ivy could see was more trees, their tops blowing in a sudden gust of warm wind. The animal grunted again, and now it sounded like it was right behind her.

She tripped, fell and kept falling, tumbling end-over-end down a hill, bumping and rolling across rocks and logs and fallen leaves and any small animal not quick enough to get out of the way. At last, she stopped. She lay on the ground, gasping as everything overhead spun.

When the spinning finally stopped, she sat up. Her head exploded in pain, and there were bright flashes of light, like a hundred cameras taking her picture at once. She felt sick.

Then everything went away.



Bright light stung Ivy's eyes, making her squint. She rubbed them and sat up. Her head throbbed, but the pain wasn't as bad as it had been before. She touched the place where it seemed to be coming from gingerly and found a lump the size of a golf ball.

*What happened?*

She remembered she had been running through the woods. She was still in the woods, sitting at the bottom of a tree-covered hill. Nothing looked familiar; and not that she knew an oak from a maple, but the trees looked different. Their trunks were very lumpy, like they were really, really old.

*I'm probably in an older part of the woods*, she decided. It was a perfectly reasonable explanation, but it didn't feel like the right one.

Ivy jumped to her feet and sucked in a surprised breath as she realized she had spent the whole night lying here. Her parents must be worried sick—even Far-Too-Busy people would notice she had been gone all night. Maybe they were out looking for her right this minute.

"Help? Help—I'm here." She called in different directions, but she only managed to scare a flock of birds out of a nearby tree. The only reply was her echo.

All the yelling and the bright sunlight made the pounding in her head worse. *Ugh. Well, this is what I get for breaking the rules, isn't it?*

She gazed up the hill. She had a vague recollection of rolling down it the night before. It looked like coming down was going to have been easier than going up—the slope was steep. She looked at it longingly but turned with a sigh and trudged away.

Rational Girl decided to speak up then, telling her the forest didn't go on forever. Eventually, she had to come to a road or something. Once she was out of the woods, she would find someplace she recognized. Perhaps someone would let her use their telephone to call home.

The Not-Very-Brave part of her, which must have just woken up, reminded her that asking a stranger

for help would be far too terrifying. She decided not to think about it until necessary.

She walked for what must have been half an hour, occasionally stopping to look around for something familiar or to swat at a bug. The longer she walked, the more Not-Very-Brave she got.

“If I can just get home, I promise I will never, ever, break the rules again.” She wasn’t sure whom she was making the promise to, but she meant it.

At last she glimpsed open ground ahead. She ran toward it, her fear melting as she burst with happiness and relief. Then, as she pushed out of the woods, her heart dropped, taking all her happiness with it.

“Oh, no.”

## Chapter 3



**T**here was no doubt Ivy had arrived at the edge of the woods. She just couldn't believe what was on the other side of the trees. She had expected a street, with houses and sidewalks and people and dogs. Instead, there was a gentle slope that led down to a gigantic field.

"Where am I?" She wasn't really sure who she was talking to, but both the Not-Very-Brave Girl and the Rational Girl, it seemed, had been shocked into silence. *Some help they are.*

Wherever she was, it wasn't home. Ivy had lived in the same town her entire life and knew there was nothing like this. She would have remembered.

The plain, which Ivy was sure led right to the end of the earth, was covered in tall grass and wildflowers. Yet, something looked out-of-place.

*Of course something looks out-of-place. It's all out-of-place!*

No, she said to Not-Very-Brave girl, there was something else; and finally she figured out what it was.

Last night, it had been autumn, but now the trees were full of leaves, and the grass was green. The gorgeous wildflowers had huge purple, orange, and red blossoms, but they made her garden at home seemed faded and pale compared to their vibrant colors. The cloudless sky was a deep, clear blue, more brilliant than the sky at home.

Out in the sunlight, Ivy was too warm, and she had to take off her jacket. A breeze blew across the plain, rippling the grass, turning it into a deep-green sea. The clumps of trees that dotted the field became islands.

Was it possible she had slept in the woods all winter long, hibernating like a bear or a fairy-tale princess?

Rational Girl dismissed the idea immediately. She couldn't have slept six whole months in a forest without being found by somebody. Still, a part of her, buried deep, wasn't so sure.

*There's something else.*

How she had gotten here wasn't as important as what the Not-Very-Brave part of her was screaming in her head. She was lost and alone, without the first idea of how to become un-lost.

Suddenly, her throat felt thick, and the backs of her eyes burned. She fell to the ground, hugged her knees to her chest, and cried. No one knew where she was, not even her. Since no one knew where to look for her, no one was ever going to find her. Would anyone besides her parents even miss her?

"Why are you crying?"

Startled, she looked up, blinking back tears. A boy stood a few feet away. He looked about her age, with shaggy blond hair falling into his bright blue eyes. He was dressed very oddly. Instead of a T-

shirt, jeans and sneakers, the standard uniform of every boy she knew, he wore a long tunic, brown leggings and leather boots. In one hand, he carried a staff a few inches taller than he was.

Ivy wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket and stared.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry, I just heard you crying and thought you might need help." The boy took a step closer, and it took all of Ivy's effort not to slide away from him. He knelt in front of her. "Are you hurt?"

Ivy was torn. Not-Very-Brave Girl whimpered, reminding her of her parent's warnings about speaking to strangers, while Rational Girl whispered that this boy might be able to help. That little bit of hope gave Rational Girl the edge, and Ivy's mouth fell open, words tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Who are you, and why are you wearing such funny clothes?"

The boy gave a little bow.

"My name is Connor. I live on the edge of the forest, not far from here." He pointed to her left, past the place where the hill that bordered the plain curved away. "And I could ask you the same thing about *your* clothes, but it's really not important. If you're not hurt, why are you crying?"

Ivy wiped her face again, and this time the words came easier.

"I'm lost. I was running through the woods, and I fell, and then I bumped my head and fell asleep. Then I woke up, but I have no idea where I am."

Connor sat back on his heels.

"Maybe I can help you find your way."

"Oh, would you?" Ivy blurted. "I feel so stupid. I can't find my house, or my school, or anything. My address is twelve-seventy-five Wisteria Lane. It would be great if you could help me find it."

Connor opened his mouth then closed it again. He looked puzzled.

"I've never heard of such a place. The only school in Zandria is inside the palace—miles and miles from here. You couldn't have walked all that way and not remember." His expression changed from happy to suspicious, and he looked at Ivy's clothes again. "What were you doing in the Enchanted Forest?"

Anger flared in Ivy's chest. Was Connor calling her a liar?

"What do you mean, there's no such place? Oh, yes, there is. I've lived on Wisteria Lane for eleven years. It should be right on the other side of this forest, or Enchanted Forest, or whatever you want to call it. All I want to do is find my way home. If you can't help me, I'll just have to...I don't know... find it myself."

Connor's mouth fell open. His face turned pale, and he looked at Ivy in the strangest way, as if she had said something terrible.

"You say you live on the *other* side of the forest? That's not possible, unless..." He looked her up and down, as if seeing her in a different light. "Your strange clothes...you couldn't be from..."

"Look, I was in the woods and something...it's no big deal. I told you, I just got turned around, and I fell and hit my head and ended up here. What *is* the matter with you?"

Ivy stood, frustrated. Lost or not, she was ready to run from this boy who had at first seemed so helpful. He was getting weird.

"If it's true," he muttered to himself, "it can't be good."

"Will you please tell me what you're babbling on about?"

"I'm afraid..." Connor paused, as if he didn't want to say what he was thinking. "I'm afraid that you're more lost than you realize. You aren't in Otherside anymore. You're in Zandria."

"What?" Ivy had heard that word when Connor was talking about some school in a palace far away. It had sounded like nonsense. "What kind of name is that? I've never heard of such a place. If you can't help me, just say so. You don't need to make up stuff."

Connor looked hurt by the accusation.

"I would never lie about something like this. I'm sorry, I can't help you to get home, but I know someone who can. You need to come with me."

"No, I won't." Ivy stamped her foot. "Not until you explain to me exactly what you mean by 'Otherside' and 'Zandria,' because it all sounds...crazy." Fear crept back, and she wondered if Connor might be bonkers.

*That would be my luck, to get lost and have the first person I meet turn out to be completely batty.* She took a step back.

Connor lowered his head then looked up at her again.

"Listen carefully. I promise that I am not lying to you, and I haven't lost my mind." He took a deep breath. "It's just that the truth may sound strange."

"I think you have crossed over from your world, which we call Otherside, and into Zandria." He held out his hand and waved it slowly along the horizon. "Everything you see is part of the Empire of Zandria, ruled by Empress Lionors. I can't explain more than that, because I don't understand how it happened."

“But if you come with me, I can take you to someone who can tell us both, and there’s a better-than-good chance he can send you home.” He held out his hand. “It’s really important that you come and meet him.”

Ivy understood only about half of what came out of Connor’s mouth, so she decided to tackle the one thing he’d said that made sense.

“Why is it so important?”

Connor’s expression made it clear he was considering whether he wanted to say what was on his mind.

“Because your being in Zandria means something. Whether it’s good or bad, I don’t know. Arden will.”

Ivy crossed her arms over her chest. She was still a little suspicious of this strange boy with the strange clothes and even stranger words. But she had been brave enough to enter the forest last night, (although it had been mostly curiosity about the fairy) and brave enough to run through the woods at night (which, if she was being honest, had been mostly fear), and brave enough to wander around in an unfamiliar place this morning (a touch of panic), and brave enough to talk to this person she had never met before (which might or might not have been desperation). So, she definitely could be brave enough to go with Connor and find someone else to help her. The only other real alternative was to sit back down on the edge of the forest and continue to cry, and that certainly wasn’t going to solve anything.

She took Connor’s hand, and he led her down the slope and into the meadow. At the bottom of the hill, a winding path cut through the tall grass. Connor turned to the right. The path was bordered with gorgeous wildflowers, and their scent was even

sweeter than she had imagined when she saw them from the top of the hill.

They had walked about a mile when the path ended at a small stream bordered by weeping willows, their long branches waving in the breeze. Connor led Ivy across the water, which gurgled and sang, on a series of large flat stones. The path continued on the other side.

About a million questions burned in Ivy's mind, and finally, she couldn't hold them in any longer.

"Where exactly are we going who is this person we're going to see and why do you think he can help me get home?"

It all came out in one breath. Connor stopped in the middle of the path, turned around, studied Ivy for a moment, and laughed.

Ivy stared back, shocked and embarrassed. He was laughing at her. This boy was just like the bullies at school. He had probably been making fun of her this whole time, taking her on some wild goose chase as a big joke. Her cheeks turned hot, and she got ready to run. She didn't care if she was lost, as long as she got away.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Connor wiped his eyes with one thumb. "I don't mean to laugh. Forgive me."

Ivy hesitated. Someone who apologized couldn't be all bad. She waited to see what he would do next, still keeping running as an option.

"Your questions surprised me, that's all." He tilted his head to one side, still smiling. "It's not a secret. We're going to the house of Arden, my mentor and a powerful wizard. His home is just over there." He hitched the thumb over his shoulder. "I think he can help you because he's the wisest man I know."

Ivy knitted her brow.

“Uh, oh, okay, then.”

They started walking again, but soon the quiet made her uncomfortable.

“So...where is it you live again?”

Connor used his staff to point behind them.

“Back the other way, about two miles from where I found you. I live with my mother, father and three sisters. Any other questions?”

Ivy had about a million more but decided to keep them to herself. She had a feeling many of them required a long and drawn-out explanation, and she wanted to get to this Arden person as quickly as possible.

“Uh, no.”

Connor started to whistle, which at least kept it from being too quiet but didn't help Ivy make sense of anything. He had said they were going to see a wizard, which sounded crazy. Wizards were something she had read about in books. No sane person would call themselves one. They weren't real. Then again, until yesterday she had thought the same thing about fairies.

They hiked for another fifteen minutes before they saw the cottage. It was adorable, nestled against the edge of the forest, the shadows of the trees turning the thatched roof a deep gold. The little house had a blue front door, and small square windows reflected the bright morning sunlight. Flowers bloomed in neat beds beside an inviting stone-paved walk.

Ivy stared. The little house was perfect, as if it had leapt from the pages of her fairy tale book.

*Maybe I'm dreaming. I'm really still in the forest behind my house, lying in the underbrush, unconscious and dreaming. Or maybe I'm dead, and this is some sort of afterlife.* Her next thought was even more surpris-

ing. *It doesn't seem like the kind of house where a powerful wizard would live.*

Connor shook her by the shoulder, jolting her from her thoughts. The pain that shot through her head as he jerked her back and forth convinced her she was neither dreaming nor dead.

"What are you waiting for? Come on." With a grin, he loped toward the house.

Ivy hesitated for a moment before she followed him, arriving at the front door just as Connor rapped on it with his staff. Scuffling sounds came from behind the door.

"Just a moment."

Ivy's stomach rolled with nerves. Since she had never met a wizard or even anyone who pretended to be a wizard, she had no idea what to expect.

The door opened, and she came face-to-face with Arden the Wizard.

## Chapter 4



**T**he man was so tall his head touched the top of the doorjamb, but his height didn't surprise Ivy any more than his grey hair. What did surprise her was how *long* his hair was; it was a silvery curtain that draped all the way down his back. His beard was just as grey, and even longer—Ivy wondered how he didn't step on it when he walked. His skin was wrinkled, like a T-shirt that has been shoved crumpled up in a drawer.

His eyes, though, which were the deep blue-gray of the sky before a thunderstorm, sparkled like diamonds. Ivy liked him immediately. He reminded her of her grandfather, who often had the same look, like he had just done some sort of mischief.

Arden greeted his guests.

"Good morning, Connor. This is an unexpected treat. Who is your friend?"

Connor straightened.

"Arden, I'd like you to meet...uh, by that, I mean this is...I'd like to introduce you to..." He spluttered

to a stop, his mouth open. "You know, I don't know her name." The boy's cheeks turned bright red. "We only just met this morning, and it was rather a confusing meeting. I forgot to ask her."

Arden gave Connor a look of amused surprise then turned his attention to Ivy.

"Young lady, please forgive my apprentice's appalling lack of manners and allow me to introduce myself. I am Arden." The wizard held his hand to his chest and bowed very politely. The hem of his deep-green robe scraped the floor, and so did his baggy, billowing sleeves. Although it was clean, the edges of the robe were worn and frayed, and it was patched in several places.

"My name is, uh, um... Ivy," she stuttered.

"Are you certain?" Arden laughed, his gray eyes twinkling. "You don't seem sure about it at all."

Ivy paused a moment, her brow wrinkling as she thought.

"I think it's the only thing I *am* sure about today. Yes, I am definitely Ivy Peterson." She smiled, and knew her first impression of Arden had been correct. He was a mischief-maker but also kind.

Arden grasped her hand and shook it.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ivy Peterson. What can I do for you on this fine morning?"

Connor recovered from his embarrassment and gave Arden a serious look.

"Ivy has a problem, Arden, and only you can help her. It may be our problem as well."

"Who am I to deny such a request? Please, come in." Arden opened the door wider, sweeping his arm to usher Connor and Ivy inside.

The wizard's cottage was tiny but very neat. One wall contained nothing but shelves full of books.

Ivy could only read one title: *The Complete Guide to Magical Herbs and Potions*.

They were in a tidy little kitchen. A short, squat woodstove sat in front of another set of shelves that were tall and narrow and filled with clay jars of all sizes and colors. The largest bore labels like *Dragon Scales*, *Horse Feathers*, and *Fairy Dust*. Scents of herbs, hanging in bunches from the ceiling, made the air smell sweet.

Arden set some chipped and mismatched teacups and plates onto the table, which had a thick, heavy top. The wood was dark, stained, and bore deep scars.

“Please, sit.”

He waved them to the stools set around the table then poured hot water from a copper kettle into the cups. He added a tray of round cakes as he took his own seat.

Ivy stared at her teacup, carefully measuring her situation. There were rules about not taking food from a stranger, told to her over and over since kindergarten by teachers, her parents, the police. Just like there were rules about not talking to strangers, and definitely never, *ever* going off with one. She had gotten into this mess because she hadn't followed the rules.

Then, she glanced around the cozy little cottage, and thought about everything Connor had said, and listened to her stomach growl, and decided today was the kind of day the rules had never considered.

She picked a cake from the tray and bit into it. It was warm and sweet and delicious. She took a sip from her cup. Tea laced with sugar. It was soothing, the heat of it running all the way to her toes, and her headache faded away.

"Now that we are settled, kindly tell me what all the fuss is about." Arden took a bite of his own cake.

Connor swallowed a mouthful of tea.

"Ivy's lost."

Arden looked at him from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Is that all? Hardly seems worth your being so excited. You have studied all the maps of Zandria I own and can recite them from memory. If anyone could help this young lady, it would be you. Honestly, I expected more from my apprentice."

Connor cleared his throat, his cheeks again turning red as ripe apples.

"Arden, you don't understand." He leaned closer, his voice only a little above a whisper. "I found Ivy at the edge of the Enchanted Forest. She says she isn't from Zandria. I think she may be from Other-side."

He leaned back and searched the old man's face for a reaction.

"I see." Arden put down his teacup, the wrinkles in his forehead getting deeper. "How do you suppose that happened?"

"That's why we came here to ask for *your* help," Connor replied and stuffed another bite of cake into his mouth.

Arden surveyed his two young guests with a thoughtful expression. Then he turned to Ivy, his voice soft.

"Perhaps, my dear, you had best tell me your story from the beginning."

Ivy, who by now was full, content and at ease, repeated everything she had told Connor. Arden listened carefully to every word. When she'd finished, he stood, went to the stove, and poured him-

self another cup of tea. He returned to the table before he spoke.

"Why did you go into the forest in the first place?"

Connor's mouth fell open in surprise.

"I think you've missed the point, Arden."

Arden peered over the edge of his cup, fixing Connor with his gaze.

"Now, my dear boy, would be a good time for you to learn that listening is as important as speaking, if not more so." He turned back to Ivy. "Just take a moment to think about it."

In her mind, Ivy retraced her steps until the moment she had first stood on the edge of the woods in her own back yard.

"I was looking for the fairy." She described the little creature she had seen the previous day.

Arden's expression was still solemn.

"You see now, Connor, how in listening then asking what *you* thought was an unimportant question, I know more than I did before. Things are beginning to make sense."

Connor stared at his mentor, confused.

"I don't see how they make any kind of sense at all!"

"Think about it carefully, Connor." Arden's tone was that of a teacher. "From the description, I would say Ivy's conclusion is correct—she did see a fairy in her back yard. And we both know there are no fairies in Otherside. So, where did the fairy she saw come from?"

Connor's frustration was obvious.

"From Zandria, of course. But how...oh, I see."

His expression turned sheepish. "However the fairy managed to break through to Otherside is the same way Ivy was able to come through into our world. I still don't understand how it could be. Unless..."

Understanding broke over his face.

"Someone has opened the Forest Gate," Arden said, "and that someone did so at least twice. Once when the fairy went through, and again when our new friend crossed over. Either way, we must discover who it was and close the gate. After we return Ivy home, of course."

Ivy was glad someone understood what was going on, because she was just as confused as ever. Feeling like she was in school, she raised her hand.

"Excuse me, could I ask some questions, please?"

Arden lifted both his eyebrows in surprise.

"Of course, my dear."

"Are you really a wizard?" It was probably least important, but it was the first question to jump out of her mouth.

Arden laughed.

"Yes, dear child, I most certainly am."

"And you can do magic?" Ivy selected her words carefully so as not to accidentally insult the nice man who had offered to help her get home. "Like... make things disappear, or fly through the air and... turn people into frogs?"

"What a silly question!" Connor sat up straight. "Of course he can do magic, everyone knows that. He's the most powerful wizard in Zandria, quite possibly the world."

"Don't be so hard on the poor girl," Arden scolded. "Otherside is a very different place, Connor, where magic has all but been forgotten."

"Really?" Connor looked first at Arden, then at Ivy, his eyes wide. "That's so sad."

"I don't know about it being sad," Ivy protested. "My...world..." The word felt strange on her tongue. "My home is nice. It's...well..." Tears welled in her

eyes. Although she missed her family and familiar things, at that moment she couldn't think of a single thing more impressive than a world full of fairies and magic. "It's my home."

Arden set his cup on the table.

"Yes, it is, my dear. And we're going to get you back there. Don't fret too much. Magic is not all wonder and fairy stories." He stroked his long beard. "Though, come to think of it, I haven't turned anyone into a frog in years. That was always a good bit of fun."

Ivy gasped and backed away from the table. Arden winked at her.

"You can find magic in everything, if you look hard enough."

She gazed out one of the cottage's windows at the flowers and green grass, not believing for a moment there was anything magical about her own world. Another question came to mind.

"At home, it's autumn. Why is it spring here?"

Arden moved to the window.

"That is a good question, but one that requires a bit of a history lesson to answer."

He clasped his hands behind his back. Sunlight streamed over his face, making his skin look like chiseled stone. He took a deep breath, as though gathering his thoughts before he spoke.

"Years ago, when there were fewer people in this part of the world, Zandria and Otherside were not separated. People came and went from one to the other as they pleased, and each got along quite well with the other. So it was for centuries.

"One day, some people arrived in boats from places far away. They settled in Otherside, and it grew and grew.

“For a while, both places continued to live in harmony. But these new arrivals had their own ways of thinking and doing things, and they decided that the way things were done and thought in Zandria were wrong. They tried to force Zandrians to their ways. Certain races, like the fairies, were hunted. They threatened to destroy Zandria.

“Rather than engage in what might have been a long and horrible war, the leaders of Zandria made the difficult decision to separate from Otherside. They, along with myself, encircled Zandria with a magical barrier to hide ourselves from the rest of the world.

“We did not want to seal ourselves away completely, however, so we created gates, one of which brought you here.”

Ivy was hesitant to interrupt.

“That’s sad, but it doesn’t explain why it’s a different season here than where I live.”

“Because of the magic that divides us, time runs differently here than it does in your world. We tend to run a little slower. Which is how it can be autumn there and spring here. It may not even be the same year, for all I know. It has been a very long time since I visited Otherside. I have no need to go anymore. All the people I knew are long gone, and that world has moved on.”

Arden continued to stare out of the window, lost in memory. After a few moments, Ivy gently cleared her throat, trying to get his attention.

“Yes, my dear?” When he turned toward her, his eyes looked damp.

“So, I’m really in a different world?” She tried to hold back the tears that burned the backs of her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just don’t understand. I’ve never

heard of any place called Zandria, and since I have an A in geography, I know it's not on a map. Places not on a map...they don't exist."

She had listened to everything Arden and Connor had told her, but it was still hard to believe there was a place, completely separate from her own, where fairies were as common as fireflies and wizards lived in cottages.

"Yet, my dear, here you are." Arden returned to the table and picked up his teacup, which he raised to Ivy before taking a long draught.

Connor leaned his head on his hand.

"I'm sorry, Ivy. I guess if you've never seen magic before then everything that's happened to you is difficult to comprehend. It must seem ridiculous, but you have to see that it's the truth."

Ivy wiped her eyes and studied the top of the wooden table. She had hoped that Connor would lead her to an answer; instead, she only had more questions. But there was one she very much needed the answer to.

"Okay, fine. Let's say that I accept that I'm not in my own world anymore. How do I get home?"

Arden sighed deeply and sat.

"The Gates between your world and ours were made with a very complex magic. They can only be opened by someone who has a Key. Zandria is like an island, only it's surrounded by magic instead of water."

Ivy's confusion only got worse.

"How can both worlds fit into the same space?"

"One lies over the other." Arden used two fingers to lift the sleeve of his robe. "Like clothing over skin, but invisible. The only way from one to the other

is through a Gate, which opens a hole, as it were, in the fabric.

"When the worlds were first separated, people came and went to between them in secret. As the years passed, and Otherside moved away from believing in magic, fewer and fewer people crossed over. I cannot remember the last time someone asked permission to use one of the gates."

"We know its happened twice the last few days." Connor turned to Arden, banging his fist on the table in frustration. "How did they do it without a Key?"

Arden shrugged.

"I don't know."

His gaze flicked over Ivy, and this time it was troubled. She shivered and shifted uncomfortably.

"Could the fairy I saw in my backyard have left it open?"

Arden leaned his head on his hand and shook it.

"The fairies are the keepers of the Key to the Forest Gate, but even if a fairy used it—and I doubt she had permission—she couldn't have left it open. The gate seals itself after someone passes through. You did not follow the fairy back through the gate, did you?"

Ivy shook her head.

"I didn't see anyone, but it was dark."

"Hmm...curious."

Arden chose a honey cake and absently munched on it, absorbed by his thoughts. The three of them sat there, not speaking, until Ivy couldn't stand it anymore.

"You said the fairies hold the key to that gate. And you said you made *gates*. More than one."

Connor tapped his spoon on the tabletop.

“There are five magical Gates in Zandria. Each has one Key, and each Key has its own keeper. They were separated so no one would have control over them all.

“Only a few people know where all the Keys are hidden. Arden does, since he’s an Elder of Zandria. Fiana, queen of the fairies, is the guardian of the Key to the Forest Gate.”

He, too, picked up another cake and stuffed it into his mouth, as if that ended the discussion.

Ivy felt hope blooming in her chest like the wildflowers outside.

“So what you’re saying is that all we need to do is to go and get the key from the fairies, and then I can go home?”

It sounded almost too simple, but when Connor nodded, her smile was unstoppable.

Arden smiled, too, and the weariness she had seen before was gone.

“It *should* be that easy. And I think it’s best if we return you home first and figure everything else out second. We’ll leave for the Fairy Kingdom at once.”

He briskly cleared the dishes away and wiped the crumbs from the table. With the housekeeping taken care of, he disappeared through a doorway at the back of the room and returned a moment later wearing a dust-gray hat with a wide, floppy brim, so tall that the pointed tip bent against the ceiling. It was so ridiculously like a storybook wizard’s hat, Ivy laughed out loud and then covered her mouth, embarrassed. She had never laughed like that before with people other than her parents.

Were Connor and Arden her friends now? They hadn’t forgotten her name yet, or ignored her. They didn’t seem to be Far-Too-Busy to help her. She de-

cided that they if they weren't quite friends yet, they soon would be. It was an interesting feeling.

"Now that I have my hat, we can be on our way." Arden grabbed a small pouch with a long strap and threw it over his shoulder. "The fairies' home is only a short walk."

He retrieved a tall wooden staff from beside the front door. The top of it was shaped like a claw holding a blue stone the size of a grapefruit.

Arden threw open the door and strode out, leaving Connor and Ivy to follow. At the edge of the garden, he abruptly turned toward the forest.

It wasn't long before he turned onto a narrow path into the Enchanted Forest. Connor stayed on his heels, but Ivy fell behind. The wizard moved quickly for someone so old, she thought as she ran to catch up.

Once they were well inside the woods, he slowed down, and she had a chance to breathe.

The last time she had been here, sightseeing hadn't been high on her list of priorities, but now she had a chance to get a better look. Everything was so green, the canopy so thick over her head the forest was in near-twilight. Birds soared above, their songs happy and beautiful.

A brilliant purple butterfly with yellow spots flew across in front of Ivy's nose. The insect hovered for a moment, seeming to study this strange creature with the big eyes and pink skin and brown hair before it continued on its way. Ivy started to chase it then remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

Arden and Connor were far ahead, almost out of sight. Being that the last thing she wanted was to get lost again, she raced to catch them.

They walked into what must have been the heart of the forest to a small clearing. On the other side was a dense thicket, shrubs and trees packed so tightly it was impossible for them to go any farther. There was no other path.

"Um, excuse me, I don't mean to be rude, but I thought we were going to the Fairy Kingdom?"

"Exactly right, young lady," Arden replied.

Ivy craned her neck to look around the tiny clearing, then upward into the trees.

"I'm sorry, but...I don't see any fairies."

She reached for the nearest bush of the thicket.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," Connor said.

She pulled her hand back.

"Okay. Then, where are we going?"

Connor rolled his eyes at her.

"You silly goat, the entrance to the fairy kingdom is a secret. You wouldn't want them overrun by ogres, would you?"

"Um...no?"

Ivy wasn't sure what an ogre was, but an invasion didn't sound like a good thing.

Connor nodded. "Of course you wouldn't."

"You sure have a lot of secrets in this place," she muttered.

"Quiet, please," Arden scolded softly. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a small silver flute with tiny symbols etched on it. He placed the instrument to his lips and blew. The notes sounded like bits of crystal mixed with starlight.

Ivy gasped as the entrance to fairy kingdom opened.



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