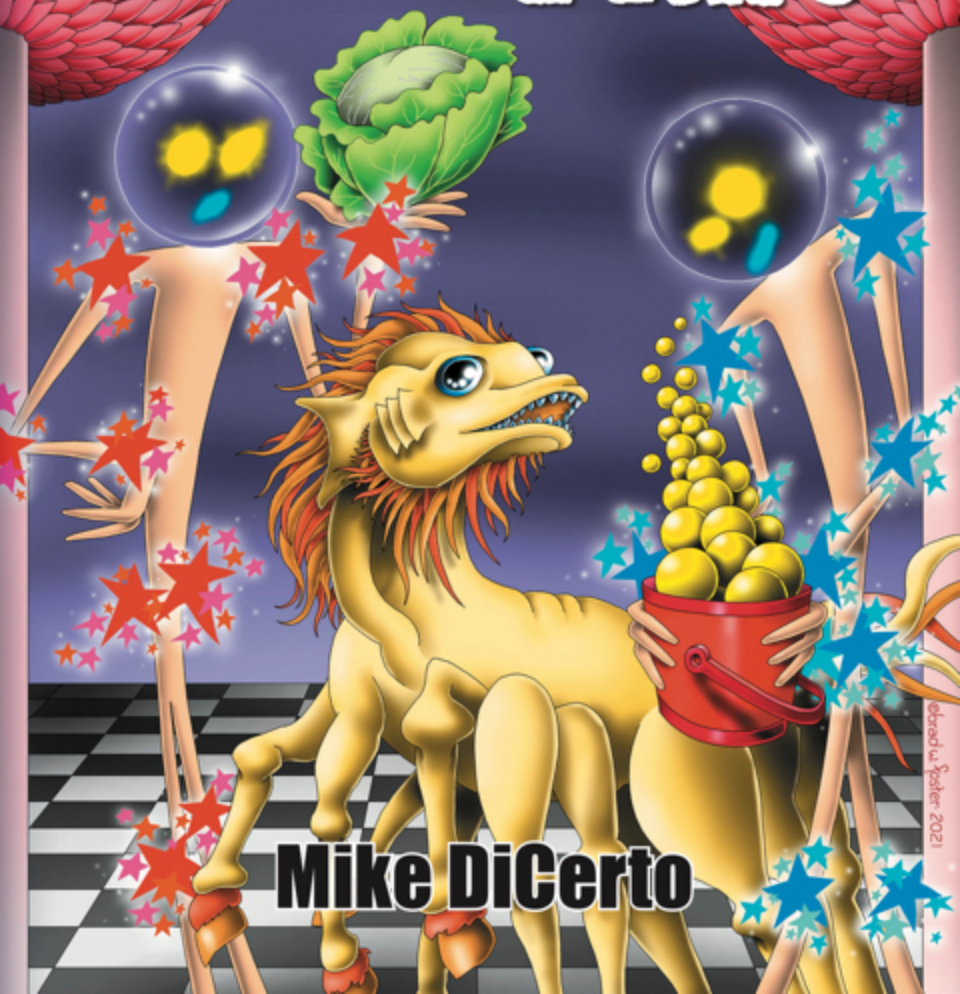


*The Adventures of Rupert Starbright*  
*Book Four*

# A Nick of Time



**Mike DiCerto**



## **RUPERT FELT A SLIGHT TREMOR UNDER HIS FEET. “WHAT WAS THAT?”**

Earnest lowered an ear toward the ground, and his ears twitched and nose sniffed with concern.

“I can hear something rumbling,” said Rainn

The tremor grew stronger, and the sound of the bins of resolutions rattling was soon drowned out by an intensifying rush of noise.

An oncoming roar.

Curious, Capricorn jogged from the room, and the rest followed him into a wide hallway lined with oblong windows of pale-blue glass. They all peered out, and there were sudden yelps and gasps.

A wall of water rushed at the castle. A monster wave from the great sea was storming in. With the force of a freight train hitting a mountainside, the wave split into a myriad of waterfalls as the avenue of windows smashed. A newly-born river scooped up all four and took them down and around the castle rooms and hallways at terrible speed.

Rainn had grabbed Rupert’s hand just as the wave struck, and they held tightly to each other as the cold waters rushed on.

## Also by Mike DiCerto

*Milky Way Marmalade*

## The Adventures of Rupert Starbright

*The Door to Far-Myst*

*The Secret of My-Myst*

*The Ghost of Winter Joy*



The Adventures of  
Rupert Starbright  
Book 4

# A NICK OF TIME



Mike DiCerto



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A NICK OF TIME

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## DEDICATION

*To my Friends outside my family.  
They know who they are. R.M. J.M.  
C.L. D.N. A.M. J.G. M.S*

# Chapter 1

## A Split Second

“Ten...nine...eight...!”

Old Year Square shivered along with the folks of Graysland as they counted down the final seconds of the fading year. Frigid winds swirled and swished around the heads and legs of the dozens and dozens who had arrived in the square to greet the newest year. On that wind raced herds of dead leaves that crunched and scraped along the stones. It *was* Graysland, after all, and here the leaves fell across all the months.

Rupert Dullz stood, his gaze fixed on the giant metal bellberry leaf that sat atop the tall silver Yearling pole, waiting for the countdown to finish. Around him stood his parents, Polgus and Olga, and his grandma Folka, who was bundled up in a brown coat and hat so thick she looked like a bear.

“Seven...six...!”

The numbers shouted by the crowd sent clouds of steam into the chill night air.

Folka leaned close to Rupert and whispered, "Did you make a wish for the New Year, sweetie?"

Rupert nodded and felt his face grow warm with a blush. A very specific wish had been floating around his head for the last few months. Ever since school began in September, he had noticed a new girl in his sixth-grade class. He wondered if she had noticed him.

It felt like an eternity since he had shared a first kiss with Mynerla in the wondrous land of Far-Myst. He remembered her often, and had wished he could meet another girl who made him feel as special as she had.

This new girl in his class had a very uninteresting name — Rainn, with two Ns and not just one old boring one. Rainn Evertree. Rupert found it hard to put two words together when she was close by. Even saying hello was harder than reading an entire page from *The History of Leaf Cutters*. Backwards!

If only she liked him as well. That was his wish.

He kept this wish tightly wrapped in his thoughts. He gazed at the sky, patched with clouds and dabs of glistening stars.

"Five....four...!"

Rupert had experienced great adventure in the wondrous lands of Far-Myst and My-Myst. He had even had the chance to see what his boring town of Graysland had been like in the old days when it was *not* so boring. That was six months ago, when he'd stepped through Pie O'Sky's door from old Grayslandville then returned home and celebrated the Winter Joy holiday with his family for the first time.

"The Big Leaf Countdown", as it was called, was one of the few uninteresting things that happened in Graysland. He didn't think his best friend Squeem was boring, either, and sent a friendly wave to him across the square, where he stood with his mom and dad.



“Three...!”

Rupert’s heart raced as pulleys creaked on thick ropes and the leaf, cut from a large sheet of green metal, began to lower. The squeaky wheels sent a flock of pigeons into the air, their fluttering wings making *fwap! fwap!* sounds.

Across the square, Rupert spotted Rainn, in a black capelike coat, a gray woolen hat pulled down low to cover half of her eyes, and a black scarf wrapped tightly around her mouth. Strands of her hair, which shimmered with streaks of brilliant electric blue, hung from beneath her cap.

Rupert thought her hair was so unboring. He had never seen anyone in Graysland with hair of such color. Everyone else’s was the usual, boring old hair colors. He repeated his wish to himself. Then, he noticed she was looking at the sky, and glanced up.

A pitch-black shadow, like that of a giant bird, pushed the clouds aside like a rude man through a crowd. Oddly, stars were not revealed. Instead, strange swirling colors, like motor oil on the surface of a puddle, shimmered.

*What the heck is that?* Rupert wondered. He turned to ask his father, who was cuddling close to Olga to keep warm.

“Two....O—!” cried the excited crowd.

Something very unexpected happened.

Everything stopped. The metal leaf froze in place less than a foot from the ground. The clouds of visible breath from the gathered residents no longer floated and vanished like ghostly vapor. Instead, it became like a solid mass of thin milk. The pigeons hung in the air like ornaments strung across a line.

All sounds froze, a silence so deep it hurt Rupert’s ears like an explosion of quiet. Only one thing moved—the colors in the sky began swirling like living rainbows all over the square. In that tornado of color, there was a rush of brilliant light and sound.

Then, with a swoosh that vibrated his body, the multicolored winds vanished back into the sky. Silence returned.

Rupert tried to look up to see if it was truly all over but discovered he couldn't. He could not move his head, or his arms and legs. He could not even shift his eyes about the square. The dozens and dozens of townsfolk were like frozen mannequins. As were the pigeons.

The only thing that was moving and spinning freely were his thoughts. His mind still worked.

This was good.

Rupert tried to think what could have possibly caused this situation. Had a really super-duper cold wind blown through and freeze everyone?

Nah.

Or maybe his thoughts had been so focused on Rainn that it affected how he was seeing the real world. Maybe it was like time was standing still.

No. That didn't seem like the answer, either.

*What is going on?*

In his field of vision, the sight of the pigeons floating in the air, wings spread, filled him with wonder.

*I can't imagine how birds could just hang in the air without flapping their wings.*

Imagine! That was the answer.

Rupert's mind sizzled with sudden excitement. *If I can't imagine why this happened maybe I can Imagine a way to stop it.*

It had been some time since he used his Imagining abilities, but he knew the first step was to make his mind as quiet as a library. He needed to shush out all the negative and scary thoughts. He thought about how peaceful the Garden of Dreams was during his journey to the wondrous land of Far-Myst. He recalled the feeling of the warm campfire, and the still night air, and the comforting songs of night birds, and funny, glowing insects.

He felt a smile form. Maybe not on his lips, but in his brain.

Then, Rupert had the image of a clock in his head, like the one over Mrs. Stonelaughter's desk at school. The clock that seemed to take forever and a day to reach 2:57—the greatest time, when school was over. Sometimes he thought the clock was broken, stuck, its gear gunked up by dust and grease.

Maybe that was what had happened in Graysland. *Perhaps there's some giant, unseen clock that makes days become nights and nights turn into mornings.* Maybe, just maybe, that clock was gunked up.

How could it be *ungunked*?

*Anyway,* Rupert thought. *Where is it? How can I clean the gears of a clock I can't see?*

He would need a special viewing glass to see it.

He figured if he could Imagine that special clock then why not Imagine a way to see it? The glass must be able to move on its own, since his arms were frozen at his sides. It would have little wings, and fly across the square, and settle on the bridge of his nose like his dad's reading glasses. It would have feathers. Purple feathers on a golden frame.

Yes! Rupert could see such a pair of eyeglasses.

A sound whispered in the solid silence. Tiny pops of cracking air. And there, across the cobblestone road, was an object hovering in the air like a purple bird. Flecks of light struck off gold and glass.

*It worked!*

The object of his Imagining was approaching, and as it drew closer and clearer, Rupert felt hope in his heart. The flying glasses settled on his nose, and through the two crystal-clear lenses, he was able to see the ghostly shapes of gears, a multitude of toothy wheels, hanging in the air

before him. One of the gears had a gap, just as Rupert had when he'd lost his first baby tooth.

*A missing tooth! I just need to imagine a new one.*

He brought into his Imagining a seed. A gear-tooth seed. He Imagined planting the seed in the empty slot. With a little splash of Imaginary water it would grow a new tooth, and the gears would move again.

A little sprout of silver popped up; and in seconds, the missing tooth was back, and the gear wheels began to turn, and...

Everything went dark. The gears, the glass lenses, the golden frame, and the purple wings all vanished. The entire town square was nothing but black.

Then, Rupert realized his eyelids were closed, and he gave them the command to open. And they did. And the town was back.

But everyone was still stuck in place like statues. Even the flock of pigeons.

Rupert turned his head and saw his grandma, her smiling face, with its busy roadmap of wrinkles, fixed and frozen.

Wait! He had moved his head! He tried his hands, and soon had his fingers flexing before his face. He took a step. Then another. He had freed himself!

His stomach sank as he looked at his parents, Squeem, and the gathered crowd. The town square was still as motionless as a frozen river. He stepped up to the New Year's Leaf and brushed its cold, smooth surface with his fingers. It was a mere foot off the ground. A single second from bringing in a new year.

"Weird," Rupert whispered.

"Really weird," someone said.

## Chapter 2

### Rainn or Shine

Rupert spun his head around so fast he felt his face had lagged behind. He was looking at Rainn, standing next to him, her hands tucked into her pockets.

He felt his mouth go dry. "You can move, too?"

She shrugged. "I got unfrozen, but my dad and my neighbors are all just standing there like dead trees. How come you're unfrozen? Did you use your superpowers?"

Rupert felt his face flush. "I don't have any superpowers."

She pointed her finger at him and smiled, the ends of her mouth rising above the black scarf wrapped around her chin. "Not what I hear. Kids at school say differently – Rupert Starbright."

Rupert smiled and looked at his feet. "That's just a name."

"A cool name," Rainn said.

He kicked at a pebble by his shoe. "You think so?"

Rainn nodded.

Worry erased his smile as he caught sight of Squeem, standing like he was carved from stone. Why hadn't Squeem, or his parents, or even his grandma been unfrozen? He had been thinking about them. Worrying about them?

Maybe. Or maybe not as much as he had been thinking about Rainn.

With a belly full of guilt, he stepped closer to his family.

"Mom? Dad? Can you hear me? Grandma?"

Rainn pointed to her father across the square. He stood frozen, his black coat belted tight and the collar up around his cheeks. "I tried talking to my dad. Nothing. Just staring at the Leaf."

Rupert looked at her dad sadly. "What do you think happened?"

She shrugged.

Rupert walked into the center of the square, his shoes making *clap-clap* sounds on the cold cobblestones. He stopped beneath the floating flock of pigeons. He studied one of the birds, its wings mid-flap.

"How can a bird just hang there?"

Rainn joined him, stroking the back of one of the birds with the tip of her gloved finger. "It's kind of cool in a weird way."

Rupert stepped closer. "I wonder if *he* would know the answer?"

Rainn turned to look at him. "Who?"

He ignored her question and let his hand slip under his coat. He felt around beneath his shirt, his face crinkling and wrinkling until suddenly a smile exploded across his mouth.

"The fish key is back!"

Rainn looked at him as if he had six heads. "Huh?"

Rupert, again ignoring Rainn's confusion, slowly pulled at the silver chain that hung around his neck. A soft blush of colored light appeared on his face as the source of the

glow—a small metal fish—was revealed. It was shimmering blue, purple, green, and yellow.

He closed his eyes. "Pie O'Sky. Pie O'Sky. Are you near? I have a question you must hear." He focused on listening, cocking his head slightly side-to-side, searching for any new sounds.

"Look at that!" Rainn shouted.

Rupert didn't even have to open his eyes. He knew exactly what she saw, and as he did open them and tilted his head skyward, he exclaimed in joy, "Pie O'Sky!"

There, hanging just beyond the town square where Rubble-Strewn Road banked into a rolling series of leaf-covered hills, was the brilliantly colored bagoon of Pie O'Sky. Rupert felt the feelings he'd felt the first time he ever laid eyes on it, and from the look on Rainn's face, she was feeling the same.

"Wow," she said, exhaling the word until she had no more breath.

Rupert dashed to meet him, and after a moment, Rainn joined the race. The gondola, shiny and as brilliantly colored as the giant air-filled balloon, touched down on the leaf-littered surface; and Pie O'Sky, with his purple beard and rainbow-splashed clothing, waved and beamed a smile. Rupert rushed up and threw his arms around Pie O'Sky, who returned the hug.

"Rupert Starbright, it is wonderful to see you again."

"I guess you two know each other," Rainn said, keeping back a few yards.

Rupert turned. "Rainn, this is my good friend Pie O'Sky. Pie O'Sky, this is my... This is Rainn Evertree. She's in my class."

Pie O'Sky extended his hand, adorned with many rings. "What a lovely name, Rainn Evertree."

"Thanks. That's Rainn with two Ns. Case you were wondering," she said, stepping up and shaking his hand quickly. "You have an...odd name."

Pie O'Sky laughed loudly. "Indeed, I do!"

"I like your beard," she said. "Cool color."

"And I like the brilliant tint in your hair!" Pie O'Sky said.

"Thanks. You're the first person to think it's nice. Most people just think I'm a weird duck."

Rupert nodded shyly. "I think it's cool, too."

Rainn looked at her feet. Pie O'Sky stepped forward and put his arm, jingling with small bells, around Rupert's shoulder.

"So, Mister Starbright, what is the problem here?"

"Let me show you."

Rupert rushed back to the square. Rainn and Pie O'Sky followed.



## Chapter 3

### Nicked

"This *is* a sight," Pie O'Sky said, letting his gaze fall over the townsfolk frozen in place. He casually strolled across the stony ground, the heels of his yellow-blue-and-red boots popping. He smiled at the sight of the pigeons and laughed at the Leaf, still a mere second from the ground.

"Yes. This is a dandy-doodle. A taradiddle. A riddle I could play on a fiddle! And we are all in the middle!"

Rupert smiled, and Rainn circled her finger beside her temple.

"What do you think happened?" Rupert asked.

Pie O'Sky said nothing for a long while. Instead, he poked around, sniffing, gazing, and even tasting the air with his tongue. He listened and looked and sniffed some more. All the time he did these things, his face danced through many expressions.

Then, his brow wrinkled, and his eyes went stern. He looked at Rupert and Rainn, folding his arms .

"Time has been nicked," he said.

"Nicked?" Rupert wondered.

"Nicked. Stolen. Absconded with," Pie O'Sky said with an unhappy shake of his head. "A single second. A tick before the tock. Someone stole a tiny moment from the clock."

"So, time is stuck?" Rainn asked.

Pie O'Sky touched the tip of his nose with a finger and pointed at her. "Stuck like a duck in the muck."

"What can we do?" Rupert asked.

"I can imagine that you, Rupert Starbright, can Imagine a solution."

"Maybe..." Rupert mumbled, walking closer to his parents again and gazing at them sadly. He then turned to Pie O'Sky. "How was a second stolen?"

"Serious questions for a serious adventure. An adventure, Mr. Starbright, on which you must venture."

Rupert knew his face showed his fear and confusion. "Where? How?"

"To Annum. The land where time is king, queen, and jester, too."

"Where is Annum?" Rupert asked.

"It's not here nor there. It's no place and everywhere. It's where seconds run and minutes waltz. It's where months can rest for weeks, and weeks just schmaltz."

"Schmaltz?" Rainn asked.

Pie O'Sky looked down at his boots and smiled bashfully. "Needed the rhyme."

Rainn chuckled, but Rupert wasn't feeling any fun.

"Do you really think I can fix this?"

Pie O'Sky placed his palms on Rupert's shoulders and smiled. "I have seen you work your wondrous tricks. I am sure you can Imagine your way to a fix."

Rupert thought about it, and felt Rainn's eyes on him. He turned to her. "What's wrong?"

"It's true," Rainn said. "The rumors in school. About you. Having powers."

Rupert felt his heart begin to race.

"I'm just a regular guy," he said, then turned to Pie O'Sky. "Can you get me to Annum?"

The colorful man nodded. "I can. No key required!"

He turned and gestured at a door—a silver door that a half-second ago hadn't been there. Now, the empty door frame glistening with spiraling sparks.

Rupert looked back at the frozen crowd. "Guess there's nothing I can do here." He took a few steps closer to the glittering doorway.

Rainn's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Can I go with you?" she asked, rushing to his side.

"It could get dangerous," warned Rupert.

She shrugged. "Good! And like you said, nothing *I* can do here, either."

Rupert was thrilled at the idea of Rainn going with him, but he kept his face serious and looked to Pie O'Sky for approval. Pie O'Sky pondered it, then looked hard at Rainn.

"Will you use your Imaginings to help Rupert if the moment arises?"

"Sure," she agreed. "I guess. If I have any."

"You do," Rupert assured her. "All kids do."

"Rupert," Pie O'Sky said, "the land of Annum is complicated and mysterious. It is made up of twelve kingdoms. Some folks call them *Houses*. They are known by others as the Ventrees, or the Klinziks, or the Sonnobans, or the Wanderers. They have also been named the Zodiac.

"They are each overseen by a powerful Head—unpredictable yet knowable. Approachable but dangerous. They can be both vengeful and rewarding. They are meticulous, although they can appear flighty and a little...kooky."

"They sound worse than Murkus," Rupert said nervously.

"No, not at all. Just...different," Pie O'Sky said. "They were once known by the folk of this town, but as many of

the old traditions faded, so did the memory of them. Just walk with caution and remember they can change the ways of the ages. They are wise, and always plotting for both good and evil. Yet, you will learn much about yourself by knowing them. They are written in the very stars themselves."

Rupert shook his head, trying to wrap his thoughts around it all. Finally, he looked at the door. He started towards it. Rainn followed.

Pie O'Sky sang out, "Walk with compassion and courage, Rupert Starbright. Be it rain or shine or cold of night."

Rupert turned and nodded. Rainn did the same.

Pie O'Sky sang out one last time. "Under stars and moon or sun of day. I am just a thought away."

Then, Rupert and Rainn walked through the doorway into a blinding funnel of pulsing, glittering illumination; and with a flash they, and the door, were gone.

## Chapter 4

### That Way

Rupert felt like his entire body was a teaspoon of salt dissolving in soda water. His body and his mind were melting and popping and sizzling and coming apart and floating in every direction. Lights and lightning flashed. Numbers and alphabets of a million languages streaked by his face, and far in the distance waited a pulsing ring of green and pink.

Closer and closer came the ring until it surrounded him and became a tube that dipped and curved and banked and flipped. Rupert wanted to laugh out loud with joy, but at the same time, he felt a scream building up. He wanted the ride to end.

Then, it did. Comforting warmth caressed his cheeks. He realized his eyes were closed, and when he opened them, he discovered he was lying in an immense grassy field. The air smelled sweet, like a fresh-cut lawn and sugar.

"Where are we?" came a voice from beside him.

He turned to find Rainn sitting up, rubbing her eyes.

"Annum, I guess," he said, getting to his feet. "Sure is a wide-open place."

"It is. Lots of grass."

The land rolled off in every direction. Vibrant, verdant grass that had not been mowed in many a day gently swayed in rippling waves across the expanse around them. Lazy hills fell and rose in easy climbs and dives.

Rupert turned and almost bumped his nose on a wooden sign attached to a red post. He stepped back and read the words printed in neat white lettering.

## **GATEMBER THAT WAY**

"Which way?" he muttered. "There's no arrow!"

He looked up at the sky, the most blue blue he had ever seen. It was even bluer than the waterproof sugar fire he had created in Far-Myst atop the Elderwind Tower. Yet, something was off.

"There's no sun," Rainn said, as if reading his mind.

"I know," Rupert said. "It's so sunny, but no sun. And look." He pointed at the sign. "No shadow."

Rainn began waving her arms and jumping, keeping her eyes on the ground.

"You're right," she said. "How bizarre. No sun. No shadow. But it's the nicest day I ever saw."

Rupert unzipped his gray coat. "It's much warmer than back home."

Rainn nodded, unraveled the scarf from around her neck, wadded it up, and shoved it into her coat pocket. She then pulled the wool cap from her head, letting her black and blue hair breathe freely.

Rupert smiled, and she noticed.

"What?"

"Your hair looks cool in this bright light," he said shyly.

Rainn blushed. "Thanks."

Rupert, shielding his eyes with his palm, turned completely around, peering as far to the horizon as his eyes would let him.

"Not sure which way to go. It's just grass as far as the eye can see."

Rainn studied the sign. "So, what makes us think we have to go to Gatemala?"

"I don't. We don't even know which 'that way' it means," Rupert said, moving closer and closer to the sign until his nose was against it.

Rainn looked at him oddly. "What are you doing? Kissing the sign?"

No." Rupert felt himself blush. "Checking to see if there was an arrow that had faded away."

"And?"

Rupert's shoulders sagged dejectedly.

"None that I can see." He pondered and thought and finally raised his finger. "If you were a sign, wouldn't the direction that the words are facing be the direction to go?"

Rainn thought about that a bit. but then shook her head. "Not really. If you're facing the sign, and it says 'that way', wouldn't that mean to go the direction *we're* facing?"

Rupert was about to disagree but didn't. "You may be right."

"So, we either go that way..." Rainn pointed in the direction the words on the sign faced. She then turned 180 degrees and pointed. "...or that way."

Rupert had a sudden idea. "Hey, maybe we should just ask it."

"Talk to a sign?"

"Why not? Pie O'Sky said this was a crazy place. I think I can imagine a sign that talks. I once met a plant that told jokes."

Rainn folded her arms. "Starbright, you are kooky, but I like the idea."

Rupert turned to the sign. "Excuse me, sign. What direction is Gatember?"

"Why do you want to go there?" said a voice rich with vibrato.

"You were right!" Rainn shouted.

"No, he wasn't," the voice said. "Turn around, you two cabbage-heads!"

Rupert and Rainn turned to find a rather large goat staring at them. It was brown and white with a pink nose and two stubby horns that seemed to be made of pure silver.

"Where did *you* come from?" Rupert asked.

The goat took a nibble of grass. "I came from then."

"Where's then?"

"You mean when is then," corrected the goat.

"Who are you?" Rupert asked, changing the subject.

"Name's Earnest. Member of the Capricorn herd."

"Starbright," Rainn whispered, "that goat is talking."

"So, no biggie. Like I told you, I knew a pepper plant that told jokes," Rupert said, turning back to Earnest. "I'm Rupert, and this is Rainn."

"Rupert and Rainn. We don't get many conundrums in this end of Annum."

Rainn pumped her fist. "So, we *are* in Annum!"

The goat cleared his throat. "And *why* are you two conundrums in Annum?"

"We have our reasons," Rupert said. His experience with adventures had taught him he could not assume everyone was as trustworthy as Pie O'Sky. Not even a goat.

He looked at the goat seriously. "And why do you call us conundrums? We're kids."

"A kid is a baby goat," said Earnest. "There are no persons, places, or things in Annum. Everything is an event. You two are unknown events. Thus, conundrums."

"Well, call us what you want. We're here for something very important," Rupert said in the toughest voice he could muster.



"Yeah!" Rainn said, just as toughly.

"Fine," the goat said. "But you're not actually in Annum. Just the foothills. You need to get to Gatember."

"Well, we can't figure out this sign," Rupert said. "It says 'that way', but there's no arrow."

The goat tilted his head curiously, a mop-like wad of grass dangling from his teeth. "Why do you need an arrow? I think the directions are obvious."

"For you, maybe," Rainn said. "Not us."

"Gatember is that way," said Earnest, his words getting chewed up with the grass. "Not this way or which way or no way. That way."

Rupert threw his arms out to his sides. "So, which way is that way?"

The goat craned his neck back. "How can which way be that way? Only that way is that way."

Rainn folded her arms. "So, we go...where?"

"Going where will get you nowhere fast." Earnest yawned, and a clump of grass fell to the ground. "If you want to reach Gatember, you can only go that way."

Rupert rolled his eyes. "Can you repeat that, but this time, point?"

The goat nodded, took five steps closer to the sign, and said, "If you want to reach Gatember you can only go that way." Earnest bumped his silver nubby horns on the sign.

"This is getting ridiculous," Rainn moaned.

Rupert, however, smiled. "I think I just Imagined which way is that way."

Rainn threw back her head. "Tell me! Before I go nuts with this silly goat!"

"It's simple. If that way is the way, and no other way is that way, then that way has to be that way."

The goat touched his front right hoof to the tip of his nose and smiled. Rainn glared at Rupert.

"It's simple!" Rupert exclaimed. "Watch."

He stepped up to the sign and gave it a hard push. The wooden sign spun around and around like a top. Within the blur of the quickly moving sign appeared a soft green glow; and as the spin of the sign slowed, the smeary green illumination grew clearer and clearer until the sign came to a full stop, its face now sideways to Rupert, Rainn, and Earnest. They trotted around to face the face of the sign, and there was an arrow — grass green — pointing. That way.

"There!" Rupert shouted.

"No. That way. Not there," the goat corrected.

"But what if it had landed in another direction?" Rainn asked.

"Then that way would have been that way," Rupert said.

Ernest made a goat-sounding cry of victory. "Now, he gets it!"

Rainn paced back and forth, pondering. Then, a tiny but definite smile rose like a sunrise on her face.

"So, the way to Gatemala is to go that way no matter which way that way turns out to be when you spin the sign to find out which way that way is!"

"Zingo! She gets it, too!" cried Earnest.

"Well, thank you, Earnest," Rupert said, walking that way. "Now, we have to get going...that way...to that place called Gatemala."

"It's not a place," Earnest said, going back to grazing.

Rupert stopped in his tracks. "It's not?"

Between chews, Earnest said, "Nope."

"So, what is it?" Rainn demanded.

Ernest finished his snack, then looked to them both. "May I simply tell you with a song?"

Rupert was surprised. "A song? Really?"

Ernest nodded. "Us folks in Annum love to sing. Music is the purest form of language."

"Okay," Rupert and Rainn agreed.

Earnest cleared his throat and began singing in a melodic voice.

Let me tell you of a day,  
Not in April, June, or May,  
It's a day that very quickly you'll forget!  
Or you'll remember It forever,  
It is always, and it's never —  
Gatember first, a day as strange  
As strange was ever!

It's a day that comes and goes,  
With the speed a mountain grows,  
And it zips right by much quicker than a  
shot.

They say this day is just a bluff,  
Too much time won't be enough,  
And too little, you will see,  
Will be a lot!

It can last for ten times longer than you  
think,

Yet you can miss it in between a half a  
blink.

It goes on forever yet  
It just ended, don't forget —  
Gatember first, a day as short as long  
can get.

Like lightning it will blaze;  
Like molasses on cold days;  
It doesn't happen yet it does;  
It always is and never was;  
I'm gonna tell you what's the buzz —  
Gatember first!

Earnest exhaled, took a deep breath, and went back to grazing green grass.

"Wow," Rupert said. "That is one strange place. We had better be off."

"Not without me," Earnest said. "No unexpected conundrums may enter the day's gates unescorted."

"Do you mind?" Rupert asked.

"Not at all," Earnest said, heading off. "I was going that way, anyway."

Rupert and Rainn chuckled and followed the goat that way, across the grassy field.

## Chapter 5

### The Gates of Gatember

As Rupert walked beside Rainn, Earnest the goat leading the way, his mind began to flash with memories of Far-Myst. His stomach tingled at the idea of adventure. He had come face-to-face with terrible horrors in the Wildness, and in the dark and scary keep of Murkus. He had learned that adventure wasn't all fun and games.

Just a few minutes before, he had been in the center of his boring town; and now, he was side-by-side with the girl of his New Year's wish, heading into the unknown. His stomach ached when he thought about his poor parents, his grandma, and his best friend Squeem standing in the cold town square, frozen stiff. He had to get that missing second back!

"How far is Gatember?" he called out to Earnest. The expansive world around him was so quiet, his shouted words seemed to struggle to get far past his mouth.

Earnest turned his head. "Not how far. How long."

"So, how long?" Rainn said with an annoyed sneer.

"Not too long," Earnest said. "About as far as a tick on a tock."

Rupert inhaled deeply. The air did smell sweet, and the sunless light that fell on his face felt great. He wanted to start a conversation with Rainn. He glanced her way but wasn't sure what to say. Rainn beat him to it.

"So, Starbright, is it true you killed a dragon on one of your adventures?"

Rupert was surprised by the question. He had only told Squeem the details of his adventures in Far-Myst and old-time Graysland. He had never said anything about killing a dragon. But, as his grandmother would say, leave a whisper out in the rain, and before you know it, it'll grow into a big old shout.

He shook his head. "No. Not killed. Murkus was just part-dragon. He was angry and sad, and did some bad things. But he came around."

"What *did* you do?" Rainn asked.

"I guess I just talked to him. Or listened. I don't know."

She smiled and nudged his shoulder with hers. "You're just being modest."

Rupert felt his face grow warm. "I did do some pretty fancy Imaginings. Got out of some really bad jams."

"You think we'll get into any bad jams in Annum?"

Rupert shrugged.

Rainn clapped her hands.

"I hope so! That would be cool. Graysland is so boring."

Rupert laughed.

Finally, Earnest stopped and began sniffing the air wildly. He mumbled to himself and raced back and forth, sniffed the air and mumbled some more. Rupert and Rainn watched him curiously.

Rupert took a sniff himself, but the only scent he caught was of sweet grass. He stepped closer to Earnest.

"What do you smell?"

Earnest's face grew serious, and he turned his sniffer off. "Something...out of time. Not in sync with everything else. Another conundrum."

"Where?"

Ernest snapped his front hoof up to point forward.

"There!"

Across the field, sitting on a large boulder, was a massive black bird, bigger than Rupert. It was a giant version of the crows he saw in his yard, but its feathers hung long and droopy, as if soaking wet. Its yellow eyes stared from under heavy lids, and its beak was curved and bumpy and deep crimson-red. Its thick, metallic-blue talons gripped the stone.

It lifted its head and studied Rupert, Rainn, and the goat. Then, the bird partially extended its massive wings, as if to block their way. Or to scare them.

"Where are you three going?" the bird asked, its voice like water over pebbles.

"Not where. When," Rainn said.

"Who are you?" Earnest demanded. "And why is it your worry?"

The bird tilted its head and folded its wings back to its sides.

"Two of you do not belong here. Two of you are also conundrums."

Rupert and Rainn glanced at each other. The bird chuckled.

"Yes. You are both from that horrid town. A town of wretched folk. A town now stuck in the everlasting present like a goat in thick mud."

Earnest turned to Rupert and Rainn and whispered, "This make any sense to you?"

"Who *are* you?" Rupert asked the bird, taking a brave step forward.

The bird's wings whipped open to full extension, creating a wall of feathered shadow. Rupert jumped back. Rainn

gasped. Then, the bird's body fell apart into a huge swarm of small, fist-sized buzzing birds that swirled, spun, and swarmed around the trio. Rupert froze as the whirlwind of living creatures with nasty faces and sharp red beaks sneered and snapped.

Finally, they all condensed into the form of a man with wild hair the color of old snow that was like a white ring about a bald round hilltop. His thin body was wrapped in a billowing black cloak. His eyes were yellow beacons. He spread his arms out to his sides so the cloth draped and hung as the wings had in his bird form.

"Now *I* control Graysland!" the man said, with the same gravelly voice as the bird.

Rupert's eyebrow rose, and he pointed at the man. "Mr. Turnbottle!"

The goat was confused. "Who?"

Rainn was as confused as Earnest. "Mr. Turnwhat?"

Rupert took another step. "That's Mr. Turnbottle. The janitor at our school."

The man's forehead wrinkled and lowered over his narrowing eyes.

"I will no longer go by that name! The name of a weak fool! I am Epoch!" He drew from his cloak a small glass vial that beamed with blue light. "I master time! And now I also master the people of Graysland. I hold that final second. The present is locked, and the future put off!"

He hissed, like a defensive cat. Then, with a snap of his fingers, he turned back into the dark flock that reformed into the giant bird and, with a crow-like laugh, flew off into the sky.

The trio stood in silence, watching as he vanished into the distance.

"He didn't seem like a janitor," Rainn said, her eyes still wide with shock.

Rupert nodded. "It was him. I know his voice."



Earnest trotted over to the boulder and sniffed it. He looked back at Rupert and Rainn.

"What's a janitor?"

"He cleans our school. Fixes broken desks sometimes," Rupert explained. "Cleans up kids' puke."

Earnest frowned.

"I never saw him before," Rainn admitted.

"He spends a lot of his time in that little room in the basement that smells like ammonia and rotten cabbage."

"Well, janitor or not," Earnest said, shivering, "that was both creepy and scary. A definite unexpected event."

"I wonder why's he so mad at Graysland?" Rainn wondered.

"I don't know. He always kept to himself. If he stole that last second, then we better find him and ask him out why." Rupert added, "Earnest, maybe someone in Gatember could help?"

Earnest nodded, took a nibble of a small purple flower, and ambled on. "Follow me!"

The grassy lands slowly changed, becoming rockier, and dotted with clumps of the same purple flowers Earnest had snacked on. Gentle hills lifted and dropped the path as they walked, and the calm breeze became more excited.

Rainn suddenly stopped and pointed. "What is *that*?"

Rupert squinted and scanned the horizon. He spotted the dark, square shape.

"Is that a building?"

Earnest shook his head and stopped to drink at a small stream that seemed to appear like magic within the grass.

"That's the gatehouse of Gatember. Take a drink. This flowtime is delicious."

"The what?" Rupert asked, kneeling to take a closer look at the flowing water.

Or was it water? It was tinted blue, and within it tiny, oddly-shaped bubbles danced within the moving stream.

Numbers! The bubbles were shaped like numbers! Tiny digits of air that floated, drifted, and popped in the flowing liquid.

He stared in awe. "Wow!"

"The main River Tempo flows through central Annum," Earnest explained, lapping up liquid with his long tongue. "Thousands of little streams, brooks, and creeks flow off the main. Little trickles of liquid time. Taste!"

Rupert cupped his hands and scooped up a sample, lifting it for a sniff. Rainn rushed over and did the same. Rupert licked a few drops. His face lit up.

"That is good. It's like liquid electricity. It tickles my tongue."

Rainn's reaction was no different. They scooped up more and gulped and gulped as Earnest watched with a big, goaty smile.

"Pretty good, huh?"

"It feels like..." Rainn tried to put her feelings into words but found it difficult.

Rupert drank some more, closed his eyes, and thought for a moment. "It's like when you come home from school all tired and then take a nap. That great feeling when you wake up. The water makes me feel like that."

"Yeah!" Rainn shouted.

The goat laughed. "Okay, you kooky conundrums. Let's go!"

They trotted on with more bounce to their steps. The wind swept and swayed, blowing their hair back.

As the gatehouse grew closer, Rupert noticed something strange. To each side of the structure, which was made of shiny, smooth blue bricks and had a single ornate brass gate in its center, was...

...nothing!

A border of *nothing* ran in either direction from the windowless building. The grass came to an end. There were

no rocks, purple flowers, or even light. It appeared as if a ten-foot wall of....nothing...stood between them and Gatember.

"I see the gatehouse," Rupert said, stepping closer, "but why can't I see anything on either side?"

"Because," Earnest explained, "there's nothing to see. Nothing lies on this border. Zero. Zilch. The center of a doughnut. Nada."

"So, what's on the other side of the gatehouse?" Rainn asked.

Earnest smiled. "That, my friends, is another story."

He marched through the gate. He did not open it or knock or ring a doorbell. He simply passed through the solid brass bars like a breeze. Rupert and Rainn hesitantly followed and found they, too, were like ghosts walking through soft butter.

When they emerged on the other side, every one of Rupert's and Rainn's senses was overloaded with a copious cornucopia of curious confusion.

"Whoa!" they both exhaled.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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