

**School of Media, Culture, and Social Inquiry**

**Disability and Fantasy in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson  
and the Olympians* series**

**Alexandra Pilling**

**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Master of Research  
of  
Curtin University**

**September 2020**

## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other qualification in any university.

Signature: Alexandra Pilling

Date: 29/09/2020

## **ABSTRACT:**

This project explores the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series?

The purpose of this research is to identify ways in which the use of fantasy in Riordan's 2005-10 junior fantasy series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, can assist in the construction and subsequent reframing of disability within the series. To do this, I position the series first as a reflection of Swain and French's affirmative model, and second as a misfitting narrative, where once the characters move into the fantasy environment, their disabilities are reframed as positive tools necessary to save the world and are honed as such. In the fantasy environment, the characters can feel pride in their disabilities and what they mean in the new setting.

This research also includes a junior fiction fantasy novella titled *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*. The novella tells the story of Audrey, a twelve-year-old girl born with one leg who, with the help of her teenage cousin and an accidental stow-away, must venture between the human and magical worlds to save her missing parents from a malevolent wizard bent on reconquering the diminishing magical world. The story reflects upon the research question by examining ways in which a significant physical disability would be presented in a fantasy environment where the protagonist may still misfit, and when it cannot be reframed.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

Thank you to Assoc. Prof. Katie Ellis and Dr. Kerreen Ely-Harper for their continued support over the past year. I can't say I was perfect and focussed and disciplined the whole way through, but the two of you certainly were.

Thank you to my parents, Elisabeth and Dale Pilling. I don't think you quite understood what I was doing, but you remained steadfast and supportive throughout. Thank you for everything.

## **CONTENTS:**

<b>Declaration</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Contents Page</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Thesis</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key Methods</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Critical Disability Studies and Critical Literary Disability Studies</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Fantasy Fiction</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i>	<b>20</b>
<i>Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover</i>	<b>22</b>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Literary Analysis</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Implications</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Dark Humour</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Secondary Character Disability</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Supercrip</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Hero's Journey</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Reflection</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Works Referenced</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover</i>	<b>86</b>

## **Foreword: A Note on Terminology:**

Within disability studies, the question of identity-first versus people-first language is contentious. Both are common use in Australia, with identity-first language “position[ing] disability as an identity category... the identifying word comes first in the sentence and highlights the person’s embrace of their identity” (People With Disability Australia, n.d). For example, a person might proclaim, “I am disabled” similar to the way I might proclaim, “I am Australian”. For some groups, “disability does not merely describe an individual body or mind, but membership within a wider cultural group” (PWDA, n.d). In contrast, people-first language avoids labels and adjectives, and the person in question is put before their diagnosis (Arts Access Australia – Disability Language, n.d), using terminology like ‘person with disability’ and ‘child with disability’. Arts Access Australia describe their use of people-first language as drawing on “the word ‘disability’ in its Social Model context, which means that someone has been disabled by barriers or discrimination, not by their impairment/s”, and as being, “similar to the term used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (n.d). However, the use people-first language is seen as going against the strict social model approach:

... 'people with disabilities' assumes that disability is the property of the individual and not of society. Here the terms 'disabilities' and 'disability' refer to a medical condition; and 'person with a disability' can easily be substituted by 'person with cerebral palsy' or 'person with multiple sclerosis' etc. As we have seen disabled people and their organisations have rejected the implications of the medical model of disability (Barnes, 1992).

While both are common use in Australia, the use of identity-first language appears to me more of an individual choice, dependent on what the person in question prefers, while people-first is more common in contemporary Australian disability studies vernacular. As such, this thesis will draw upon people-first language. However, there are many instances in published academic works where the author will use terms such as ‘disabled person/people’, which may appear in this thesis within cited quotes. Similarly, I would also like to note that while the term ‘non-disabled’ is usually favoured over ‘able-bodied’, there are instances where the latter will appear throughout this thesis within cited quotes. Vic Finkelstein, in a quote used in chapter four, uses the term ‘able-bodied’ several times in his description of The Village, a thought experiment which imagined a place optimised for a community of people using wheelchairs. As this quote is from 1975, it is likely that the use of ‘able-bodied’ was not as contentious a choice as it is now, where disability language has been refined to be more inclusive and less oppressive.

As well, the use of ‘I’ throughout the thesis is another personal choice to lessen the distance between myself and my research. I do not believe that this kind of research warrants the kind of distance commonly seen in other areas of academia.

This thesis, through its analysis of *the Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, refers to ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), and dyslexia as disabilities. The Disability Studies centre at the University of Leeds defines ‘impairment’ as “an injury, illness, or congenital condition which causes or may cause a loss or difference in physiological or psychological function”, and ‘disability’ as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers” (1999). ADHD Australia describes ADHD as a chronic, lifelong

condition characterised by “inattention, distractibility, hyperactivity and impulsivity, and [may also be] linked to other co-occurring mental health conditions” (n.d). The Australian Dyslexia Association describes dyslexia quite simply as “trouble with reading and spelling despite having the ability to learn” (n.d). While ADHD and dyslexia both possess elements of disability and impairment simultaneously, both are presented as being disabling in the world of the novels, prior to the move to the fantasy environment. This will be discussed in further detail in chapter four.



## **CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION**

When I was young, my favourite book series was *The Song of the Lioness* quartet by Tamora Pierce (1983-89). It was about a young woman named Alanna who wanted to be a Knight of The Realm of Tortall, a position reserved for men. Alanna concocts a plan with her twin brother, Thom, to trade places. He, having no desire to train as a knight, would take Alanna's place at a convent to learn magic, and Alanna would disguise herself as a boy, named Alan, and become a knight. The series followed Alanna's tests and trials, including being outed as a female during a duel with an evil sorcerer, a (short-lived) romance with the realm's prince, and achievement of her ultimate goal: knighthood, and recognition as a woman doing a man's job (according to the book's logic, at least).

In subsequent interviews with Pierce, she stated that her earlier works were written in response to what she deemed significant lacks in children's fantasy of the time: that of dynamic female heroes in her favourite books as she was growing up, and it was in response to those books that Pierce began plotting the *Song of the Lioness* series in the mid-1970s. In a 2011 interview with *The Atlantic*, Pierce stated that "...so many of the female superheroes were heroes because of magic. None of them was a superhero because she could hit a bad guy", and that she "wanted to see female sword-slingers most of all" (qtd. in Rosenberg, para 23). Pierce's influence on the genre can certainly be felt now in the dynamism of female fantasy book heroes today<sup>1</sup>, women who move between worlds into new environments where their ambitions and abilities can make a difference, and overall it is quite difficult to encounter a junior or young adult novel of any genre today which does not feature a dynamic female protagonist. However, there continue to be gaps, including a lack of representation of

---

<sup>1</sup> Consider Alina of Leigh Bardugo's *Grisha* series (2012-14), Karou of Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* trilogy (2011-14), and Jude and Taryn Duarte of Holly Black's *Folk of the Air* series (2018-19), among many more.

disability. This Master of Research project attempts to address that gap through the creative work *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover* and this exegesis.

I have not read the *Song of the Lioness* series in some time now. My set was water damaged after a storm felled a tree on my house and caused leaks. But I have never forgotten them. Reading the series when I did in the mid-to-late 1990s (not to mention the many subsequent rereads) while being exposed to the ‘girl power’ rhetoric of the era provided the sort of empowering gender equality narrative that may have gone begging had I grown up in any other era. But not only that. Certainly, fiction, especially fantasy fiction, tends to be reactionary to the era in which it is being produced, but there is an undeniable sense of reassurance that the medium provides. Children’s fantasy functions in much the same way as fantasy for older readers in that it offers younger readers the chance to encounter and disseminate points of human difference, real-life issues and stressors, and personal concerns in a safe, private manner. I was a lonely child growing up, a misfit in a small town by virtue of being the child of two life-long city slickers. I was also particularly fond of the *Sweet Valley High* books by Francine Pascal, and the *Babysitters Club* series by Anne M. Martin. But those books were pieces of realism, based in mundane, everyday situations where the characters fit perfectly in their mundane, everyday worlds, and they did not capture my imagination the same way that the *Song of the Lioness* quartet did, or even the *Harry Potter* series did a few years later.

Children’s fantasy fiction is like a warm blanket, soothing and easy and *fun*. And it achieves all these things while educating junior readers on points of difference — different races, cultures, sexualities, gender identities, and religions — which make the world so incredibly vast and varied. It has been argued that writings for children have “considerable

potential to influence what its intended readers regard as normal, good, acceptable, important, unjust, or to be feared” (Reynolds, 2011, pg 4). However, in my readings, much as Tamora Pierce noted the lack of dynamic female characters in her reading experience, I noticed that there was a lack of disability narratives for children<sup>2</sup>, and most noticeably, I felt this lack in fantasy novels. This is strange to note when you consider how many of the most bestselling, popular, culturally pervasive works of children’s fiction over the past seventy years have been works of fantasy<sup>3</sup>. Fantasy, by definition, is unlimited in every aspect, in terms of world, culture, rules and people. Hawkes and Kanake (2019, para 2) argue that all fictional space is imagined space, so why not make all narrative spaces as diverse and engaging as possible?

One such book series doing work to interrogate themes of disability in children’s fantasy fiction is Rick Riordan’s 2005-10 series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*<sup>4</sup>. This five part series follows Percy Jackson, a twelve-year-old boy with ADHD and dyslexia, navigate the real and fantasy worlds as he discovers that he is not an ordinary child, but rather the demigod offspring of a mortal mother and godly father. The series features a wide-reaching cast of characters with the same and similar disabilities to Percy, all of whom have very different experiences of their disabilities, and use those disabilities, as well as elements of ancient Greek myth, to full use in building an engaging, fun, and interesting fantasy environment. Within the series, those disabilities carry a greater meaning, indicative of power and ability, while not erasing implications those disabilities originally had for the characters or have for the people currently reading. Without the use of fantasy and other fantastical elements to reinforce the story, it is difficult to say whether the series and Percy’s story

---

<sup>2</sup> This was admittedly a recent realisation. As a child reading children’s fiction in the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s, I was likely not noticing the breadth, or lack thereof, of diversity in fiction except for where it applied to my own experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Consider the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, the *Harry Potter* series, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and perhaps even *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series.

<sup>4</sup> As well as Riordan’s many other spin-off series, which effectively demonstrate other points of difference, too.

would have been as fun and engaging, or if its messages would have been delivered as effectively.

This research investigates the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? To answer, I took an interdisciplinary approach, using methods and theories from the areas of critical literary disability studies and fantasy fiction studies to investigate how the series can assist in challenging dominant social and cultural stereotypes of learning disabilities such as ADD, ADHD, and dyslexia through its mode and genre. I also created an original children's fantasy novella, titled *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*. The novella follows Audrey Muffinstump, a twelve-year-old girl born with only one leg, as she travels between the layers of her magical world to save her parents from a sorcerer bent on restoring the world to its former glory. The novella seeks to expand on the themes and findings present in the analysis series and uncovered in the research.

Chapter two introduces and defines key terms, areas, concepts, and theorists, including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notions of staring and misfitting, and John Swain and Sally French's proposed affirmation model of disability and elaborates on why they were chosen and what purpose they will serve later in the thesis, as well as discussing why there is hesitation in creating disability narratives in fantasy environments. Chapter three discusses the current and previous academic inquiry being done in my relevant fields. This includes a brief look at the idea of disability activism and accountability in online, non-academic settings, where my three fields have intersected in the past and how it was done, and why it is crucial for these fields to continue to intersect in the future. Chapter four analyses the *Percy Jackson* series in depth, discusses how the series functions as a product of its time, how it might have

drawn on ideas found in Vic Finkelstein's idea of *The Village* as well as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's ideas of misfits and misfitting, and looks at how secondary character disability is constructed and responded to when it is not being experienced by a protagonist. Chapter five reflects critically on the writing process of the novella, titled *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*. Here I discuss a proposed outline for the direction I feel the series could take, the rationale for why I rewrote the story from a third-person narrative to a first-person narrative, and how the fantasy elements present serve to reinforce the narrative, rather than detract from it. Chapter six assembles the findings, reinforcing the idea of the Percy Jackson series as a misfit narrative and the usefulness of fantasy in telling disability narratives, and discusses ways forward for this research. Taken together, this research aims to dismantle some of the hesitance and concern around the use of the fantasy genre being used as a vehicle for telling disability narratives.

## **CHAPTER TWO – KEY METHODS**

As stated in the prior chapter, this research is heavily intersectional in its approach, bringing together materials from a selection of fields to answer: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? This chapter lays the necessary academic foundations for the rest of the thesis by introducing key theories and highlighting their connections with the creative writing process.

In the first section, I will be discussing concepts central to this research from the fields of Critical Disability Studies, and Critical Literary Disability Studies, with particular emphasis on the works of, John Swain and Sally French, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. In the second section, ideas and key theories around fantasy fiction, how fantasy uses fantasy-specific metaphors to discuss disability, impairment, and illness, and how the use of Possible World Theory can work to tie fantasy studies together with disability studies. Third, I will be discussing my analysis series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan, why it was selected for this analysis, how it operates as a fantasy and disability narrative, and what it achieves as both. Fifth, I will explain how my novella, *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*, operates as a methodology, and what its aims are.

### **CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES, AND CRITICAL LITERARY DISABILITY STUDIES**

There are myriad ways, or models, through which disability is discussed, studied, and understood. Melinda Hall of Stanford University lays out the intentions of the Critical Disability Studies (CDS) field as “to analyze disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon” (2019). Simi Linton writes that CDS functions to:

... weave disabled people back into the fabric of society...as full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed (2005).

These manifestos position the field as heavily interdisciplinary and intersectional, and implies that the field functions more as a methodology rather than a “subject-oriented area of study” (Schalk, 2017). From CDS, other areas of focussed study emerge, linking and weaving disability theory into film studies, literature studies, queer theory, crip theory, race theory, gender studies and cultural studies, among many, many others. The role of these myriad fields is to critique, analyse, and discuss the ideologies which abound in the representations of dis/ability seen and heard in our wider contemporary culture and society. Tobin Siebers states that “the ideology of ability is, at its simplest preference, for ablebodiedness... and at its most radical, defines the baseline by which humanness is determined” (2008, pg 8). In their text, *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (2010), Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić state that “disabled bodies appear to shore up a sense of normalcy and strength in a presumed-to-be able-bodied audience” (pg 1). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states that, “...disability is little more than the product of cultural rules that govern what a body does or is meant to do” (1997, pg 8). These ideas position both ability and disability as social constructs which can be reinforced or rejected by their depictions in the media. Extensive work interrogating disability representation in the arts and media has been done (not limited to the works of Chivers and Markotić; Alison Wilde; Colin Barnes; David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder; Jeffrey Preston) however, delving any deeper into these areas currently sits

beyond the scope of this research, which critically reflects on literature, the *Percy Jackson* series in particular, and the writing process.

Critical Literary Disability Studies (CLDS), is concerned with the critical scrutiny of representations of disability in literature. This involves the interrogation of how the dis/abled body in literature reinforces or subverts the dominant social and cultural norms of the time in which the literature was produced (Hobgood & Wood, 2018, pg 33). CLDS generally investigates works of literary fiction (see Mitchell and Snyder, 2001; Barker and Murray, 2018; Williams, 2009; Wood, 2011; Rile, 2009; Wilson, 2017; Holmes, 2010) rather than popular fiction (an umbrella term used here to denote works including genre, junior, and young adult fiction)<sup>5</sup>. Because popular fiction does not (usually) share literary fiction's seriousness, there is a perceived "nervousness" which occurs when disability forms part of popular narratives. On this, Ato Quayson writes that when disability forms part of a narrative, it taps into an "active ethical core" as the text in question "is seen as having a direct effect on social views of people with a disability in a way that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer" (2007, pg 19). For centuries, in and out of popular genre fiction, people with disabilities have been portrayed as little more than stereotypes (Barnes, 1992), so this reluctance to properly investigate and write these depictions in popular fiction is understandable. Similarly, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray point out that "it is rare to encounter an account of... a physically different body that does not extend a comment on what that body does or... means" (2018, p 2), and Mitchell and Snyder state that: "the effort to represent is inevitably fraught with politics" (2001, pg 40). Whether it intends to or not, the depiction of the disabled body, in and out of fictional spaces, always extends a political and

---

<sup>5</sup> While there does appear to be an emphasis on literary fiction in CLDS, there are examples of in-depth readings being granted to works of children's and young adult fiction, particularly in the past decade (see Wheeler, 2013 and 2019; Nichols, 2018; Buckley, 2015; Day, 2012). As well, cross-over is possible, with works like Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland* being considered a classic piece of literary children's fiction today.



cultural commentary on how disability is interacted with and understood at a text's time of production.

What all these theorists and fields share is a highly social outlook and a rejection of the medical model, which positions disability as a bodily issue requiring medical intervention. However, the social model is an extremely broad category, functioning much like a methodology, too, and while the fundamental idea is true across models, there are myriad models<sup>6</sup> drawing and expanding upon the ideas of the social model to create wholly new ones. For example, Alison Kafer proposes the Relational/Political model, which “sees disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions” (2013, pg 11). Elizabeth Wheeler proposes the Testing model, stemming from the rise of standardised school testing in the 1990s and 2000s and the increase in ADHD and anxiety diagnoses in children (2019, pgs 87-90). John Swain and Sally French propose the Affirmative model:

... a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled (2000).

The affirmative model (sometimes also referred to as the affirmation model) essentially works to reject the ‘personal tragedy’ aspect of disability, certainly a theme seen throughout this thesis’ analysis series, which will be discussed further in chapter four. The model operates similarly to the theories and findings of the late disability studies academic, Tobin Siebers, who proposed the idea of Complex Embodiment. This refers to the idea that

---

<sup>6</sup> While these are referred to as models, it could be argued that they function more as critiques of the social model.

disability is both biological and social, and that many people with disabilities straddle the line between the social and medical aspects of their disability daily (2008, pg 25). Indeed, one is inextricably bound up in the other and rather than advocating for one over the other, many people with disabilities embrace their bodies as something which may require both social and medical intervention as needed. Where they differ, however, is in Siebers' somewhat matter of fact, abstract relationship with disability. Swain and French look upon disability as a thing which enriches lives and encourages positivity. This almost light-hearted take on disability has seen it applied to many different areas, from the stories of disability carers (Heyman, 2017), to occupational therapy (McCormack and Collins, 2012), to the arts (Cameron, 2011). On the application of the affirmative model to arts, Cameron states:

Disability arts offer an alternative perspective. What is involved in disability arts is a reclamation of the impaired body; a statement of the right of the impaired body to respect and to inclusion on its own terms; an affirmation of the rights of people with impairments to do things differently and to be who we are as we are (2011).

While Cameron's statements refer more to the creator rather than the creation itself, the sentiment can be applied to written disability narratives, too, and can be read as an affirmation not only for the characters within a disability narrative, but also for the readers with disabilities who may be consuming that literature. Cameron's interpretation also implies a kind of 'misfit' situation whereby disability arts and artists sit separate from mainstream arts and artists.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines a ‘misfit’ as occurring when “...the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, pg 594). Elisabeth Miller expands on this definition, adding: “For people with disabilities, these moments of misfitting occur when their bodies and minds conflict with materials built for the ‘able-bodied’” (2016, pg 36). While Garland-Thomson originally coined the term and concept to be discussed in relation to disability through a materialist feminism lens<sup>7</sup>, the idea of feeling out of place in a world which should accept you is not one that is limited solely to that area. Recently, Elizabeth Wheeler explored the concept of misfitting in relation to the way “readers and pop culture consumers fit themselves into narratives” (2019, pg 9). Wheeler uses fitting and misfitting to examine fan communities, particularly in relation to J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (where disability representation is certainly implied, though never explicitly stated), by discussing “whether the series satisfies the longing to move from misfitting into discovering a world where you fit, a world that was ready for you before you even knew it existed” (pg 9). This idea of a world that is ready for you before you knew it existed is one that is very easily applied to the *Percy Jackson* series, which holds similar themes to the *Harry Potter* series, in that the protagonist discovers that they are not who they thought they were and must undertake a journey to discover who they are and where they fit. In chapter four, I will be using the idea of misfitting in tandem with Vic Finkelstein’s notion of The Village to make sense of Percy Jackson’s world, and the double meaning disability holds within it, as well as in my novella, which will be addressed in chapter five.

---

<sup>7</sup> A branch of feminism which “attempts to focus specifically on social arrangements that emphasize the role of women--most notably the family, domesticity, and motherhood--but bring to its analysis an attention to the gendering discourses which promote women's marginalization... one of the most crucial aspects of materialist feminism is its concern with questions of ideology and how they relate to history and agency.” (Sullivan, 1999)

Garland-Thomson also developed the theories and ideas around staring, or what she terms disengaged looking, opposed to engaged looking, where the starer (giver) observes the staree (recipient) to discern what is ‘wrong’ with them (2009, pg 3).

When people with stareable bodies ... enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies. (pg 9)

As with misfitting, Elizabeth Wheeler applies the ideas behind staring and stare management to a 2013 analysis of the junior fiction novel *Wonder*, by R. J Palacio (2012). The novel follows multiple points of view as August Pullman, a boy with, we are told, significant cranio-facial deformities<sup>8</sup>, as he begins his first year in a public school after years of home schooling. August (known as Auggie throughout the novel) experiences many instances where his classmates and other acquaintances stare at him, with some of his classmates brazenly asking what happened to his face. August’s key tactic to deflect the stares is to deploy humour and make jokes, at both his and other’s expense. Colin Cameron states that: “Disability humour is a shared emotional response to the particular forms of oppression that disability involves” (2014, pg 71), however, August is not sharing his jokes with a wider disabled community, nor is he deploying humour to elicit an emotional response from his classmates. August tells jokes to deflect the stares from his face. Staring and the wider idea of stare management is key to analysing particular scenes present in my novella, *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*, where one characters, Jack, learns of the protagonist’s,

---

<sup>8</sup> While never described in these terms, or explicitly diagnosed in the book, August’s facial deformities are described in detail on page 88.

Audrey's, disability after watching her remove her prosthetic leg. Up until that point, Jack has been unaware of Audrey's disability, and reacts with shock until Audrey draws attention to it. Staring can also be applied to looking at the relationships between the characters in the *Percy Jackson* series. While neither ADHD or dyslexia are overly prominent or visible disabilities, the shared collective consciousness between the characters tells us that each knows what to look for in the other, meaning that they can highlight and draw attention to each other's disabilities through jokes and other offhand comments.

While neither misfitting, staring, or any other concept discussed here were ideas developed with children's fiction or fantasy fiction in mind, Wheeler's applications of both prove that they are ideas certainly worth exploring in this context. Academics have previously pointed out that CLDS cannot continue to function while the majority of academics continue to focus exclusively on literary fiction. Kathy Saunders notes that the lack of connection between CLDS and children's fiction prevents both fields from growing (2004, para 4). Similarly, Ria Cheyne notes that "it is only recently that CLDS has given serious consideration to disability in genre fiction" (2018, p 185). Patricia Dunn notes that of all forms of difference considered in children's and YA writing and research, disability is considered the least (2015, p 1). The application of these methodologies to children's and fantasy literature offers a new way of discussing these fields, and brings them together in ways they have not been discussed or understood before. However, to better bridge these fields, a more in-depth exploration of fantasy fiction theory is required.

## **FANTASY FICTION**

Fantasy is tentatively defined as the "construction of the impossible" (James & Mendlesohn, 2012, p 1). Fantasy "flaunts its deviations from reality" and "create[s] the

unbelievable, twist[s] the taken-for-granted and turn[s] things inside out” (O’Keefe, 2004, pg 22). Rosemary Jackson suggests that this lack of true definition is what makes the fantasy genre so “seductive” to write and study, with its “free-floating and escapist qualities” (1988, pg 1), but this amorphous state works against the genre, too. Compared to other genres, fantasy is often derided. The derision is seen historically, too. In 1712, in a magazine called *The Spectator*<sup>9</sup>, Joseph Addison wrote what is often considered to be the first ‘critique’ of the fantasy genre, saying:

There is a kind of writing wherein the poet quite loses sight of Nature, and entertains his reader’s imaginations with the characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence but which he bestows upon them; such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits. [This way of writing is dependent on] the poet’s fancy, because he has no pattern to follow in it, and must work together out of his own invention (Quoted in Wolfe, 2012, pg 7).

Further, in a later issue of *The Spectator*, Addison wrote, “There are few words in the English language which are employed in a more loose and uncircumscribed sense than those of the fancy and the imagination” (Quoted in Wolfe, 2012, pgs 7-8). These issues, while certainly historically prevalent, still resound today. Cruz, Pollock, Meyer, Short, and Johnson described their thoughts regarding fantasy as being “a fun, albeit somewhat shallow, genre”, which “lacked the seriousness and depth of more respected genres, such as memoir and historical fiction” (2004, pg 185). Some take issue with the ‘escape’ element of fantasy: “The concept of escape [from reality] in literature... is often used in opposition to interpret[ing

---

<sup>9</sup> Gary K. Wolfe likens *The Spectator* to a popular blog.

reality], where the former is meant to indicate superficiality, immaturity, vulgarity, and ignorance” (Fabrizi, 2017, pg 1). As well, the idea of reality, or the distance from reality, is questioned. The question of reality is essential to making meaning of fiction, so if fantasy is a genre characterised by its freedom from the constraints of reality, how can fantasy fiction — by definition, unreal — contain meaning and significance?

Fantasy remains a powerful genre; it offers readers a “perspective on their own worlds by exploring a strange fictional place” (O’Keefe, 2004, pg 11-12). The fantasy genre does not offer new or different concepts to those experienced in our own world, or those explored in other genres of literature. Fantasy takes those ideas and concepts and magnifies them in new, dramatic, and enticing ways. For example, the *Harry Potter* series explores the rise of an evil, magical dictator who could bring about the downfall of the wizarding world, and a subsequent wizarding war between binarily ‘good’ and ‘evil’ factions. Despite the presence of magic and the amplified sense of threat and urgency in this scenario, it is not one unfamiliar to our world today, or in decades previous. It is the un-reality of what is happening in the text which allows the reader to make sense of it all in a way that may offer them the tools required to navigate these issues as they may arise in their own lives.

Similarly, fantasy can be used to explore ideas of disability, impairment, and illness in abstract ways. To use the *Harry Potter* series as an example again, the series often makes use of fantasy-specific analogies to explore the stigma around invisible disabilities and impairments, depression, chronic pain, and even HIV/AIDS. Often, the analogies are not particularly deep or complicated, particularly when it concerns the Dementors, physical manifestations of depression and other mood disorders (Wheeler, pg 166). By turning the mood disorder into a character that can be banished with the power of positive thoughts, and

whose potent physical effect on people is treated with chocolate, it makes it appear to readers with similar mood disorders that their disabilities are things which can be fought, and defeated. Similarly, in terms of the *Percy Jackson* series, the characters' disabilities serve twofold purposes: the real aspect, where characters face the very disabling realities of having ADHD and dyslexia in environments where neither is well-received, and the fantasy aspect, where the disabilities are reimagined as superpowers. However, in discussing how the fantasy genre reimagines disabilities, there exists the need to acknowledge where the genre can fall into damaging traps, particularly through tropes such as the miracle cure/treatment (where a disability is treated or cured through magical or otherwise fantastical means) and disability as superpower, leading to a supercrip reading. Kafer describes a 'supercrip' as:

...those disabled figures favored in the media, products of either extremely low expectations (disability by definition means incompetence, so anything a disabled person does, no matter how mundane or banal, merits exaggerated praise) or extremely high expectations (disabled people must accomplish incredibly difficult, and therefore inspiring, tasks to be worthy of nondisabled attention).  
(2013)

Cheyne notes that when analysing a genre, consideration needs to be given to "genre context," including plot formulas, stylistic conventions, and generic limits, as "crucial factor[s] in analysing representations of disability" (2013, pg 44). Conventions of genre absolutely need to be considered before making such claims. Can Percy's, and the other characters', eventual turn as saviours of the world — because of and not despite their



disabilities — truly be read as ‘supercrip’ in a work of fantasy, where convention tells us to expect amplified abilities (be they magical, physical, or otherwise) of some kind?

The fantasy genre is one which evolves constantly to reflect the culture in which it is being produced. Many texts produced at similar times may possess many elements in common. For example, consider two ground-breaking works of fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1937-1949), and C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* series (1950-56). On the surface, these books are not particularly similar in terms of plot or structure, though they share many elements in common: good versus evil binaries; Christian allegories; heavy use of myth; wars; and young, child or childlike characters. In a more modern context, consider the prevalence of the superhero genre. Superhero narratives gained massive traction in the wake of post-9/11 America (Treat, 2009, pg 105). These narratives employ a kind of alternate reality where the day can be saved by factors or people external to the rest of humanity. In these worlds, superheroes able to fight injustices are conjured to defend (usually) the United States from real and imaginary threats.

The departure from reality as we know it is integral to fantasy fiction. Scenarios which take place in fantasy texts would make very little sense in the world as we understand it. In fiction, worlds and characters must be reconstructed so that the idea of heroes performing massive feats of strength, magic, or daring can make sense. This deconstruction and reconstruction of narrative worlds and characters is known as Possible World Theory (PWT), and it is a crucial tool to the study of narrative theory<sup>10</sup>. The main tenant of PWT is to expound on the idea that “reality — conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the

---

<sup>10</sup> The theory of possible worlds was initially developed in the second half of the twentieth century by analytical philosophers to “resolve problems in formal semantics” (Ryan, 2012, para 4). In the 1970s, philosopher David Lewis began to apply the theory to fiction and narrative.

sum of what exists physically — is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds” (Ryan, 2012, para 2). To break these distinct worlds down, we must first situate ourselves. We live in the actual world (AW); non-fantasy (realism) texts employ the possible actual world (PAW), where the world reflects ours as an alternate reality. This particular aspect of Possible World Theory is well suited to a social model analysis, as a PAW is exactly what the social model proposes; a world which promotes full, unhindered inclusion, a world we do not have yet. Fantasy and other non-realism texts employ the possible non-actual world (PNAW), a world with elements vastly different or non-existent, like magic or superpowers. The last, the non-actual world (NAW), or impossible world, is a world which cannot be conceived and cannot exist (Ryan, 2012, para 2). Fantasy often works as an embellished reflection of our own world, a space where social and cultural anomalies at specific points in time can be explored in a safe, exaggerated space. This allows fantasy narratives to embody the warm, soothing, and fun qualities I described as being essential to children’s fantasy in the previous chapter, because in fiction, no one truly gets hurt, and a happy ending is almost always a given.

A common trope among fantasy texts is to begin in a PAW and end in a PNAW. This departure from the PAW and arrival in the PNAW serves as a critical step in Joseph Campbell’s concept of the Hero’s Journey, an archetypal framework for storytelling. The Hero’s Journey is timeless, and spans formats. Its prevalence does not appear to be dependent on any particular cultural factors, either. The structure is familiar to consumers of fantasy; it has pervaded our social consciousness so thoroughly that its influence is felt throughout all fantasy media. Summed up, the Hero’s Journey can be understood as comprising of four steps:

**Departure:** The Hero is called to adventure and sets out.

**Initiation:** The hero is thrown into the quest

**Find the Elixir:** The hero finds what they were looking for/defeats the enemy.

**Return:** The Hero returns with the elixir and restores the world as it was.

Elizabeth Wheeler discussed the Hero's Journey as it relates to disability narratives by stating that junior and young adult texts which follow this structure "take what others regard as weakness and redefine[s] them as part of the Hero's Journey" (2019, pg 4). This idea ties in well with the affirmation model of disability discussed earlier in this chapter, where disability is taken as something integral and positive to the lives of people with disabilities. Characters use their disabilities as jumping-off points for each step in the Hero's Journey, or use their disability to make informed, ethical decisions for what to do next. As an example, in the *Harry Potter* books, a children's fantasy series heavily following the Hero's Journey structure, Harry experiences debilitating headaches and pains in his scar which he identifies as being from his connection to the dark lord, Voldemort. Before anyone else acts, Harry uses the knowledge gained from his pain to move forward and fight. In terms of *Percy Jackson*, there would be no jumping off point if his and the other characters' disabilities didn't exist. In this case, without the disability, there is no Hero's Journey to undertake. Here, then, it should be questioned whether the *Percy Jackson* series would remain a full, contained, coherent story should the characters' disabilities be eliminated entirely. Mitchell and Snyder's Narrative Prosthesis asserts that that literary (and filmic) depictions of disability have historically been used as a "crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (2001, pg 49). With the removal of that crutch, would the story continue to make sense? The question of whether the

role of ADHD and dyslexia within the series operates as a narrative prosthesis within the *Percy Jackson* series will be explored further in chapter four.

## **PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS**

This research seeks to answer the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? In chapter four, I will be discussing the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series according to the methodologies I have discussed in this chapter in further detail, however the metric by which this series was selected for analysis ought to be addressed first.

First and foremost, the series was chosen for analysis for its popularity with readers, and for its nearly exclusively cast of disabled characters, with each child character present being ADHD, dyslexic, or both, all of whom have incredibly different experiences of their disability. Not only that, but the *Percy Jackson* series also encapsulates that requirement of children's fiction that I set out in the introduction: it is warm, soothing, and fun. The tone is warm; we spend the entirety of the series reading from Percy's first-person point of view. Soothing: there is familiarity in the characters and settings. Particularly as the story takes place over a five-book series, we spend a lot of time with the characters, getting to know them, and Percy, through Percy's unique point of view. The blend of recognisable elements of Greek myth with modern day New York City as well as other large American cities and landmarks makes it a comforting series to read, especially for American readers with or without dyslexia or ADHD. But for children who do navigate schools with these disabilities, Percy's unfiltered experiences in schools (in the short times at the beginning of each book that he is in one), and the way he chooses to navigate them, may prove comforting, too. And fun: the story simply is fun. With chapter titles like, "Everybody Hates Me but the Horse"

(2007, pg 86), “We Steal Some Slightly Used Wings” (2008, pg 255), and “We Meet the Sheep of Doom” (2006, pg 193), it is obvious that Riordan took a lot of care to make every facet of the story fun. Percy dots his retellings with choice pieces of ridiculous advice, and observations too, like: “The thing about flying a Pegasus during the daytime is that, if you’re not careful, you can cause a serious traffic accident on the Long Island Expressway” (2007, pg 115), and: “The harpies washed with lava instead of water, to get that extra-clean sparkle and kill ninety-nine point nine percent of all germs, so Annabeth and I had to wear asbestos gloves and aprons” (2006, pg 81), and: “We did the summons after dark, at a seven-metre long pit in front of the septic tank. The tank was bright yellow, with a smiley-face and red words painted on the side: Happy Flush Disposal Co. It didn’t quite go with the mood of summoning the dead” (2008, pg 154). Percy is an incredibly charming narrator; as a reader, you want to spend time with him.

The series has not often been discussed in academic settings, though there are a small selection of articles discussing it from a variety of perspectives, from American culture (see Morey and Nelson, 2015), language and translation (see Mugijatana, Habsari and Putri, 2014; Rifanda, Nababan and Djatmika, 2019), and disability representation, specifically dyslexia (see Kirby, 2019). An interesting fact to note is that of the small body of academic articles available on the series, many of them come from non-English speaking academics and universities (see Slinning, 2018; Tandberg, 2016; de Regino and Cardoso, 2016; de Almeida and Teodoro, 2018). I have chosen to focus on this series for analysis not only for the reasons set out above, but also for the interesting way it utilises and reframes disability, something that, thus far, has been given no academic consideration.

## AUDREY MUFFINSTUMP AND THE DOORS OF CLOVER

My novella, *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*, is the first in a proposed fantasy series about Audrey Muffinstump, a twelve-year-old girl born with only one leg. The story follows Audrey, her cousin, Tabitha, and a human stowaway, Jack, on a cross-country journey to find their respective parents, while uncovering a growing threat to their magical world long thought dormant. A full synopsis will be available in chapter five, where I will be reflecting further on the writing process.

The novella reflects on the research question by investigating how the use of fantasy can aid in the construction of disability. Where Riordan's series shows how non-physical learning disabilities can be reframed within fantasy, my novella presents a young girl with a physical disability in a fantasy environment. The decision to write Audrey as a girl born with one leg was made simply because I had not encountered a character like her in the children's fantasy fiction I was consuming. While the story was written with the intention of rebutting particular tropes often seen in children's disability and fantasy fiction, such as the miracle cure (*The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett; the *What Katy Did* series by Susan Coolidge); disability as inspiration (*Wonder* by R. J Palacio); disability as supernatural/imagined/psychosomatic (The *Harry Potter* series by J. K Rowling; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl); the 'Deus Ex Machina' (*Odd and the First Giants* by Neil Gaiman; *The Inheritance Cycle* series by Christopher Paolini), it was also written to explore how a character like Audrey would navigate a physical disability in a world that, however magical, she still finds herself misfitting in. Her disability cannot be reframed as a superpower the same way that Percy Jackson's disabilities can, so the decision to give her the ability to 'move' seamlessly between the layers of her worlds by using an element (water, in Audrey's case) as a conduit, an ability granted to only a select few of her kind, operates as the

key way that Audrey moves through her fantasy setting. This concept of abilities within fantasy will be discussed further in chapter five.

This methodology chapter outlines the key theories and theorists I will be utilising throughout this thesis to answer the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? I outlined a number of methodologies from CDS and CLDS, from Swain and French's affirmative model, to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's misfitting and staring, and from fantasy studies, from the concept of Possible World theory and the Hero's Journey, which will prove essential in answering this question. While these fields do not often interact in meaningful ways, it is not an impossible venture. Disability studies and fantasy studies have more in common than apart. The PAWs and PNAWs present in works of fantasy offer a representation of the idealised world posited in social model arguments for worlds with full, unhindered inclusion. Many fantasy narratives exist as misfit narratives, too: Harry Potter is a misfit in the Muggle world, Percy Jackson is a misfit in the American school system, Audrey is a misfit living with a grandmother who does not understand her. There is little reason for this lack of intersection, and over the course of this thesis, I hope to show how both fields stand to learn much from the other. The following chapter is the literature review, where I examine a selection of works relevant to this research, including Elizabeth Wheeler's 2019 text, *HandiLand*, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (2000), and discussing how disability discussion and activism, especially in regards to children's fiction, has grown into the realm of online forums and influencers.

### **CHAPTER THREE – LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the previous chapter, I outlined the key methods and methodologies which will be used to answer the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? I discussed how I will be using literary analysis of the series through the lenses of Critical Disability Studies, Fantasy Fiction Studies, and Children's Literature Studies, as well as creative practice through which I wrote and constructed my own fantasy disability narrative for children.

As established in the previous chapter, this research is heavily intersectional, and the main fields of critical disability studies, fantasy studies, and children's fiction studies, have not often intersected in the past. As a result, the research drawn upon in this chapter includes both traditional academic sources and more unconventional material. This trend has been highlighted by critical disability scholars, too (see Bruns, 2018; Haller, 2010; Ellis, 2015). Contemporary disability research is no longer the exclusive domain of the medical profession, or the world of academia. The growing world of literary 'influencers' in social media, through platforms like Goodreads, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and websites like Disability in Kidlit as well as privately maintained blogs, mean anyone with an interest can engage and share their opinion. In the previous chapter, I mentioned Elizabeth Wheeler's application of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's ideas of misfitting to disabled fan communities, which essentially sees disabled readerships ascribe new meanings to text and films through their readings, developed through the lenses of their disabilities, which are later shared within those communities and adopted by members.

This chapter begins by outlining where research into difference in children's fiction has been paid in the past. Second, I compare literary disability studies with disability film studies,



both of which hold many similarities, but remain interestingly disparate. Third, I discuss the state of research into children's literature with themes of disability, how it has changed from some of its earliest iterations in the early 2000s to now.

Academic inquiry (as well as fictional inquiry) into forms of diverse differences in junior and young adult fiction has become more and more prevalent. Academics have interrogated depictions of race (and, by extension, cultures) and racial inequality in junior and YA fiction (see Austin & Chandler, 2016; Gray, 2017; Sarig, 2019; and Dudek, 2018). Sexuality is a growing field of academic inquiry too, with Queer Theory academics examining texts featuring main characters who identify on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (see Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016; Young, 2019; Kidd, 2011). The growing awareness around the spectrum of gender, and the growing acceptance around gender dysphoria in children, and an influx of authors wanting to tell their personal stories has given rise to academics inquiring after junior texts with these themes, too (see Glenn & King-Watkins, 2019; McDermott, 2019; Byers, 2018). Inquiries into the representations of different world religions (in particular, Judaism and Islam) have become more commonplace, too (see Hilbun, 2009; Sigalow & Fox, 2014; Davila & Volz, 2017). However, interrogation of disability representation, particularly in junior and YA fiction, more focussed rather than broad terms, remains uncommon.

This is not as large a gap in other fields. Film studies has an incredibly robust area interrogating disability representation in films, including popular and genre films (see Wilde, 2020; McDaniel, 2016; Mogk, 2013; Wälivaara, 2018; Hall, 2016; Ellis, 2015). However, where this differs from the examination of literature with themes of disability, film studies tends to err towards specificity, analysing films of note in depth and with rigour with specific

regard to particular titles, eras, creators, as well as both local and international films (see Chivers and Markotic, 2010; Fraser, 2016; Hayes and Black, 2003; Mitchell and Snyder, 2008; Whittington-Walsh, 2002; Callus, 2019; Nikolaidis, 2013; van Kraayenoord, 2011). While the study of disability in films sits beyond the scope of this research, the contrast between the fields of disability film studies and literary disability studies is quite stark, and literary disability studies could stand to learn quite a lot from disability film studies. Both literature and film are, as mentioned in the previous chapter, markers of our cultural understanding of disability through the way that disability is portrayed. Essentially, they are tasked with very similar, if not the same outcomes. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher, and media studies academic, famously stated in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, that “the medium is the message” (pg 5). The idea here is that it is the medium, and not the message which is being told, is what the focus ought to be on; one cannot grasp a concept without a medium to carry it. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon says that while no one medium is inherently better or worse than the other, each medium possesses individual strengths which may lend itself better to the message being told (2004, pg 110). Perhaps this accounts for the difference in the sheer volume of research being done on disability in film as compared to disability in literature; in a visual medium, there is (usually) far less to imagine compared to written mediums. However, when taken alongside the lack of research being done on disability representation in children’s fiction, where there is often a far more explicit emphasis on disability which does not allow itself to be easily ignored, this gap becomes confusing. While there is more to imagine in a written medium, in children’s fiction, we are explicitly told much more, there may be illustrations, and there is far less reliance on the idea of disability as metaphor. In short, children’s fiction is a very visual written medium, yet the amount of critical research done on it from the perspective of disability representation remains incredibly small. This much broader question of why this

kind of research is lacking is, again, beyond the scope of this research, but it is certainly one to consider moving forward.

Much of the current research on disability in children's fiction seeks to quantify and categorise books with disabled protagonists (see Blaska, 2004; Beckett, Ellison, et al, 2010; Adomat, 2014; Keith, 2004) rather than offer meaningful analyses on specific texts. These scholars tend to work from an educational standpoint, referring to texts implemented into school curriculums to educate students about disability. The analysis of works of popular children's fiction featuring protagonists with disabilities tends to be overlooked in favour of texts to be read and examined in classrooms. Some works seek to examine pieces of fiction featuring characters with disabilities and categorising them based on the 'type' of representation they provide. For example, in 2001, Cambridge University released an encyclopedia entitled *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English*. This text featured entries on various themes, tropes, stories, and authors common or known to children's fiction at the time. Within this text, there is an entry on disability written by Kate Agnew and Julie Partridge (pg 209) which gives a broad historical overview of children's texts featuring disability and lists a selection of texts with protagonists with disabilities. The text described children as being "imprisoned in [their] wheelchair", "wheelchair-bound", and "crippled" (pg 209). It was criticised for adopting primarily medical terminology, and as being "[uninformed] by contemporary ideas about disability" (Saunders 2004, para 5). This entry is demonstrative of the way in which this sort of inquiry is conducted has changed, just how recently the disconnect between the fields was felt, and how important critical disability or social model informed approaches are. However, these works are useful to examine as they provide insight into the ways different areas of academia approach stories and characters with disabilities. While each approach varies significantly in what it deems important or of note,

they all share a vested interest in how that disability is being represented. The issue of representation is a crucial one in critical disability studies. However, the way in which this representation has been scrutinised in children's fiction has changed drastically over the past twenty years.

In past two decades, several articles (Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Koss and Teale, 2009; Wopperer, 2011; Rieger and McGrail, 2014 and 2015) appeared espousing the benefits of inclusion literature in the classrooms. These articles do not so much as list texts which are read in classrooms but discuss the benefits of the presence of inclusion literature in such settings. This trend culminated in Patricia Dunn's 2015 textbook, *Disabling Characters*, in which Dunn selects, reviews, and analyses a selection of texts belonging to different themes (such as awakening, isolation, and identity) which may be read in school classrooms. As well, each chapter's culmination in suggested classroom discussion questions further highlights the acknowledged need for further conversation and directs it to an audience whose ideas and beliefs are constantly evolving and developing. This kind of research on disability representation in children's books demonstrates not only the need for children with disabilities to see themselves reflected in the characters they read and witness, but also the need for children without disabilities to have their thoughts and beliefs challenged. Kimberly Reynolds writes that "[children's fiction] plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world" (2011, pg 4). Dunn's work and others like it take this idea and asks how we can stir the conversation and push it along.

In 2019, Elizabeth Wheeler released a hybrid academic/autobiographical text titled *HandiLand: the Crippest Place on Earth*. In this text, Wheeler examines a selection of children's media with disabled representation and intersperses the analysis with anecdotes

about her life as a mother and daughter of people with disabilities. The somewhat unorthodox format of this text is indicative of how communal and personal disability research, advocacy, and information has become in the wake of social media. Wheeler discusses books, films, blog posts, internet comics, YouTube videos, and real-life locations with implications for disability representation and remarks upon them in ways which ask of the reality and quality of the disability, or the theme, being represented. Operating similarly to Wheeler's text is a website called Disability in Kidlit, a platform for readers with disabilities (not necessarily academics or industry professionals) to review children's books with disability representation. A comments section at the end of each review allows people to share opinions, ask questions, and interact in a way that traditional academia may not allow.

While the approach to disability representation in junior fiction is and continues to be extremely multi-faceted, the writings of contemporary disability studies scholars offer useful insight when interrogating the research question. While the educational and more literary approaches of teachers and children's literature scholars offers a firm basis for the more auxiliary aspects of crafting and researching narratives for children, they ask and answer completely different questions. My question asks how disability is constructed in one particular work of fantasy, not what value it has in being educational. However, there is still much work to be done. The dismantling of the many barriers which hinder the full inclusion of academics with disabilities is also something which requires further addressing. The often-biographical nature of disability academia and research is a crucial part of the field which cannot and should not be undervalued<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Biographical approaches to disability in film are often seen.

This literature review discussed a selection of texts relevant to the fields this research is located in, and demonstrated the lack of an intersectional approach between them. However, this lack is not felt as soundly in other similar fields, like disability film studies, where an equal regard appears to be given to films, regardless of genre, artistic merit, intended audience, or time and context of production. Critical literary disability studies could stand to learn a great deal from this approach, where little regard has been offered to works of popular children's or fantasy fiction with disability representation. This gap between fields is the focus of this research, where, using the *Percy Jackson* series as a case study, I attempt to bridge them in ways not yet granted much consideration. The progression in approach, demonstrated in the highly medicalised Agnew and Partridge entry on disability to the vastly more social and inclusion-focussed texts by Wheeler and Dunn are indicative of a turning tide in disability research involving works of children's fiction, but the fact that there are so very few texts and researchers devoting time to combining these areas shows that there is still much work to be done.

The following chapter will comprise of the literary analysis of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series by American author, Rick Riordan. I will be taking the tools, information, ideas and theories compiled over this chapter and the one previous and applying them to a broad analysis of the series in terms of its disability representation and the role fantasy plays within the series. I will be examining how fantasy affects the disability representation, and whether the fantasy elements in the series contain any broader meaning to be deconstructed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – LITERARY ANALYSIS**

This chapter comprises the case study of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (2005-09) by Rick Riordan. The *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series is a five-part junior fantasy-adventure series by Rick Riordan. First published in 2005, the story follows the eponymous Percy, a twelve-year-old boy with ADHD and dyslexia, as he discovers he is a demigod (the offspring of a god and a mortal<sup>12</sup>) son of the Greek god, Poseidon. After being attacked during a school trip by The Furies (emissaries of the God of the Underworld, Hades), Percy is escorted by Grover, a satyr, to Camp Half-Blood, a summer camp and training ground for other demigods. The overarching plot of the series involves a rogue demigod, named Luke (son of Hermes), expressing great rage with Mount Olympus (the home of the Greek gods) and the gods for rarely expressing interest in their demigod offsprings' lives. He breaks away from Camp Half-Blood and attempts to resurrect the titan, Kronos, to overthrow Mount Olympus and eventually take over the world. This plot is uncovered at the conclusion of the first book, after Luke attempts to murder Percy for his role in a prophecy that is predicted to come to pass when a child of 'The Big Three' (either Zeus, Poseidon, or Hades) turns sixteen. As the series progresses and Percy grows closer to reaching sixteen, Percy and his friends encounter other characters and gods from Greek myth who operate to both help and hinder Percy's Hero's Journey. At the conclusion, Percy manages to defeat Luke and Kronos, save the world, get the girl, and return to a state of relative normalcy.

I begin this chapter by briefly outlining the time and context of production, how the rise in standardised testing in the USA converged with the rising popularity of superhero

---

<sup>12</sup> The terms 'demigod', 'half-blood', and 'hero' all come under this definition, and are used interchangeably throughout the series, and this thesis.

narratives in post-9/11 America to give us this superhero narrative featuring a character with a learning disability fulfilling a prophecy to save his country. Then, I discuss how the series operates as a Misfitting narrative, as a reflection of Swain and French's Affirmation model of disability, in that at no point does a character feel shame for their disability, which serves a double meaning in the story, and as a reflection of Vic Finkelstein's notion of The Village. Third, I discuss how dark humour functions within the story, first as self-defeating, and later life-affirming. Fourth, how secondary characters' disability operates within the story through the centaur character, Chiron, the satyr character, Grover, and the rest of the demi-god characters, all of whom have ADHD and dyslexia. Fifth, how the story works against typical supercrip and inspiration porn readings through its cast of characters with disabilities who serve their purpose without the wider non-disabled population ever knowing. Lastly, I discuss how the fantasy genre and the Hero's Journey works to create narratives which empower readers.

## **BACKGROUND**

In discussing any text with themes of disability, it is important to consider the time in which this text was produced. Any fantasy or disability narrative acts as a reflection of the society in which it was produced, a key element both areas have in common. *The Lightning Thief*, the first book of the Percy Jackson series, was initially published in the USA in 2005. Around this time and in the decade earlier, many laws regarding students with ADHD and other attention disorders were being changed and introduced. Concurrent to the changes in laws, many schools were introducing standardised tests and exams to determine a child's "gaps and lacks" (Wheeler, 2019, pg 89)<sup>13</sup>. Children born after 1980 were among the first

---

<sup>13</sup> Australia experienced similar changes, with standardised literacy and numeracy testing beginning the late 1990s, followed by the implementation of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing in 2008.



generations to be exposed to standardised testing in schools, which some scholars link directly with the increased diagnoses of anxiety and depression in children, teens, and young adults born after that time (see Danforth and Kim, 2008; Graham, 2008, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). By the mid-1990s, forty-three American states had implemented standardised tests in elementary schools, culminating by the early 2000s with the No Child Left Behind act. In the late 1990s, ADHD diagnoses skyrocketed, and at a rate vastly higher than other industrialised nations. By 2000, it was estimated that 5% of school-aged children in the USA had some form of attention disorder (Danforth and Kim, 2008), and between 1990 and 2000, the production and prescription of ADHD drug, Ritalin, increased by an estimated 500% (Dorfman, 2006).

With the rise of ADHD, ADD, and dyslexia in the 1990s and 2000s, disability studies came to recognise the value of these kinds of neurodivergence. In his foreword to Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (2011), Tobin Siebers writes:

Disability studies values neurodiversity inside and outside the classroom. It views different kinds of thinking as a critical resource for higher education, not as a form of deviancy that obstructs learning or needs to be eliminated from academic life (pg xi).

While sometimes sitting apart from disability, disability studies took a highly social, highly affirmative stance regarding neurodivergence. In the quote above, Siebers reflects on the importance of including neurodiversity within disability studies, and using the example of education highlights the ways impairments can be reframed as diversity rather than deviance.

Further, by highlighting neurodiversity as a ‘critical resource’, Siebers asserts that being neurodiverse can bring with it benefits and a positive social identity. Siebers’ discussion also signals towards the impacts of enabling and disabling environments which are constructed as much through attitudes as they are physical environments. I will return to this concept later in the chapter when I discuss Finkelstein’s thought experiment The Village.

Another factor to consider in terms of time of production is that America was still recovering from the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks. Communications studies academic, Shaun Treat, notes that more (film-based) superhero narratives have been created post-2001 than all prior years combined (2009, pg 105). These films typically used recognisable brands and heroes from pre-existing comics, meaning they were reassuring and comforting; Superman has fought for “truth, justice, and the American way” for close to eight decades. While these films were based on properties previously dismissed by some as being ‘lower’ entertainment, the films of the time took decidedly darker turns which sometimes precluded a child audience, though there were a number of children’s media pieces which discussed similar themes in easier ways<sup>14</sup>, including the *Percy Jackson* series. However, while the series does not have a familiar protagonist to fall back on, it does use familiar source materials (in the form of classic Greek mythology) to construct a modern-day America facing familiar, frightening situations. The series depicts many American monuments being attacked or otherwise destroyed which Percy and his superhero-esque cohort save and/or idealistically dream of rebuilding. When taken alongside the disability aspect of the series, Percy and his friends are framed as heroes not unlike those in Greek myth; as children who do not necessarily have a responsibility to save the world, but who take up the mantle anyway.

---

<sup>14</sup> Not limited to literature, but also including television series like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-08); *Star Wars: Clone Wars* (2003-05); *Xiaolin Showdown* (2003-05).

## IMPLICATIONS

The implications for Percy's, and the rest of the characters', disabilities are spelled out early. In Percy's second meeting with Annabeth, she explains to Percy that he is not who, or even what, his diagnoses have led him to believe:

[Percy says] "You don't know anything about me."

"No?" [Annabeth] raised an eyebrow. "I bet you moved around from school to school. I bet you were kicked out of a lot of them."

"How —"

"Diagnosed with dyslexia. Probably ADHD, too."

I tried to swallow my embarrassment. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Taken together, it's almost a sure sign. The letters float off the page when you read, right? That's because you're hardwired for ancient Greek. And the ADHD — you're impulsive, can't sit still in the classroom. They're battlefield reflexes. In a real fight, they'd keep you alive. As for the attention problems, that's because you see too much, Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal's... Face it. You're a half-blood."

A half-blood.

I was reeling with so many questions I didn't know where to start.

(Riordan, 2005. pp 87-88)

This exchange reframes the reader's (if any) prior misconceptions of disabilities like ADHD and dyslexia. By framing them as indicative of power and ability, Riordan rebuts the (then current) assumptions of children with learning disabilities, where children are often characterised, however unfairly, as dangerous, erratic, distractible, violent, and anti-social

(Harnum, Duffy & Ferguson, 2006, p 1338; Gajaria, Yeung, et al, 2011, pp 16-18). In this series, all children with learning disabilities are assumed to be demigods with the potential to be world-saving heroes who must make the journey safely to Camp Half-Blood or risk being captured and killed by a monster who does not wish for them to fulfill that potential. In this story, these children do not belong in a formal school setting; that setting will not and does not understand or nourish them in the way that they need.

When in school, Percy experiences the same difficulties any child with attention and learning disabilities would. Percy tells us that he has gone through six schools in six years (pg 9), visited the school counsellor for anger management techniques (pg 9), and that things often happen and change around him without him being aware of it (pg 11). He also mentions that the school he is currently at, Yancy Academy, "...a private school for troubled kids in upstate New York" (pg 1), is full of kids as "troubled" as he is, and that several teachers have left due to "nervous breakdowns" (pg 4). Because of these difficulties, Percy has developed particular epistemologies, or certain ways of knowing and navigating, his school and other social situations. Typically, contemporary society does not match the needs of children, or adults, with disability. For Percy, his schools do not match his needs. In a 'human' school environment, where teachers (often portrayed as literal monsters) want him medicated<sup>15</sup>, and adhering to societal 'norms', Percy is a misfit. As discussed in chapter two, Rosemarie-Garland Thomson defines a misfit as occurring when "...the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it" (2011, pg 594). Percy's discovery of his demigod heritage and his arrival at Camp Half-Blood marks his arrival at an environment where his disabilities fit perfectly and are put to use in ways which help the characters to

---

<sup>15</sup> Though whether Percy or any of the other demigod characters are, or ever were, medicated is never acknowledged.

properly flourish and grow, rather than seeing them be the cause of stress, self-hatred, and sadness.

In this sense, the world of Camp Half-Blood also works as a reflection of Swain and French's affirmative model of disability. I defined the affirmative model in chapter two as:

... a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled (2000).

This perfectly encapsulates the lifestyle, attitudes, and identity of Camp Half-Blood and those who live there. There, the children's disabilities are not things to be ashamed of, and they no longer hold the same connotations as they would if they were in a structured school classroom. The disabilities become benefits, and their lives are further enriched by them now that they have moved into a place where they fit.

However, while Percy finds a world where he fits, he learns that those who do not share his disabilities sit at a distinct disadvantage: while demigods possess the ability to see through The Mist, a veil which shields mortals from the monstrous realities of the world, most mortals (or those without ADHD and dyslexia), cannot. According to the internal logic of the series, monsters of Greek myth exist in the 'real' world, even interacting with mortals and being direct causes of injury or death. In Percy's case, on his arrival at Camp Half-Blood for the first time, he, his mother, and Grover are accosted by the Minotaur. During the battle, Percy's mother is hurt and stolen, carried down to the Underworld where Percy and his friends must rescue her later.

Though unknowing, mortals' reliance on demigods to fight these monsters renders them almost entirely helpless. Even the titan Kronos, lord of time, speaks of the importance of "ridding the world of bothersome heroes" (Riordan, 2012, pg 79) before he can enact his plan to destroy Western Civilisation; humans are unable to stop him, but the demigods can. This characterisation of humans and their dependency on half-bloods may hark back to an earlier time where hyperactivity and hyper-vigilance was highly valued, as they could see and sense danger before others. In a 2019 podcast for ABC Australia, psychologist and author, Andrew Fuller, spoke of the changes in how people with attention deficit problems have been valued by their communities over the past thousand years. There was once much value placed on them for their ability to keep their communities safe from oncoming harm as they were able to sense danger more quickly than their counterparts (Fuller and Hendry, 2019). Similarly, Fiona Place discusses this shifting value in terms of people with disabilities being respected workers in farm and factory settings around the turn of the century, with this value only declining with the rise of World War One and eugenics (2019, pgs 196-200). The act of turning disability into a thing experienced by the (non-disabled) layperson in this universe also bears striking similarity to the work of South African disability activist and academic Vic Finkelstein, especially his work on a thought experiment called The Village.

Finkelstein (1975) posited The Village as a place optimised for a community of wheelchair-users; ceilings and doorways are lowered in buildings, streets are perfectly level, only other wheelchair-users appear in the media, only other wheelchair-users administer medical advice. The people there have complete autonomy over their lives, and they all share the same critical consciousness. Regarding the few non-disabled occupants of the village, Finkelstein describes their lives and subsequent problems thusly:

...one of the first things they noticed was the heights of the doors and ceilings. They noticed this [by] constantly knocking their heads on the door lintels. Soon all the able-bodied members of the village were marked by dark bruises on their foreheads... the wheelchair-user doctors, wheelchair-user psychiatrists, wheelchair-user social workers, etc., were involved in the problems of the able-bodied villagers. The doctors produced reports about the aches and pains of the able-bodied. They saw how the bruises and painful backs were caused by their physical condition... [they] analysed the problems and wrote their definitions. They said these able-bodied people suffered a 'loss or reduction of functional ability' which resulted in a handicap. This handicap caused a 'disadvantage or restriction of activity' which made them disabled in this society. (paras 4-7)

The Village used almost Bakhtinian carnivalesque<sup>16</sup> ways of thinking to highlight the problems faced by people with disabilities each day in environments not suited to their needs, and through their interactions with people of authority who do not share their disabilities, but shape the discourse around it. In this experiment, it is the non-disabled who are rendered disabled by the optimisation of a place which has not factored non-wheelchair users into its creation. In the *Percy Jackson* series, the world as it has evolved has not done so in a way which matches the needs of the mortals who inhabit it. While the problems faced by the mortals in this series are not inferred to be overly common ones, the fact that they cannot be aware of the dangers show how little consideration is afforded to them by the 'higher' beings in the text. In the final book, when Kronos and his titan army have descended on New York

---

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtinian Carnavalesque, a concept developed and expounded upon by theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, describes a state in a society where roles are reversed. Subordinate voices are dominant and dominant voices are subordinate. Diverse voices are brought together, eccentric behaviour is deemed acceptable, and otherwise insoluble alliances are made (Bakhtin, 1984, pgs 107-108).

City (the present site of Olympus, which is accessed via the magical 600<sup>th</sup> floor of the Empire State Building), time is slowed, mortals attempting to enter the city are magically turned away, and the human population of the city is put to sleep where they stand by Morpheus, a minor god who has sided with Kronos' army. On arriving in the city and seeing the people asleep at the wheels of their cars or in the streets, fires flaring, and alarms blaring, all while Kronos' army continues to march, Percy remarks: "Everyone in New York was in danger — and all those lives depended on us" (Riordan, pg 188, 2013). In the fantasy setting, it is the mortals who become the misfits in a world established to be unfit for them to navigate.

## **DARK HUMOUR**

Though Percy is described in text as a witty, good-looking, fiercely loyal pre-teen who can skateboard and play basketball (he is twelve-years-old at the series' outset), he presents himself as an outcast with few friends, never drawing attention to himself. He fits the typical stereotypes of children with ADHD and dyslexia quite well. These learning disabilities are also believed to be "self-pathologizing" (Honkasilta, Vehmas & Vehkakoski, 2015, p 248), with the stereotypes around them so pervasive that even the children with the disorders come to believe them.

Mom fished a blue jellybean out of her candy bag. "I wish [Poseidon] could see you, Percy. He would be so proud."

I wondered how she could say that. What's so great about me? A dyslexic, hyperactive boy with a D+ report card, kicked out of school for the sixth time in six years.

(Riordan, 2005, p 38)



The use of defeatist, often dark humour can constitute one of the many epistemologies people with disabilities employ to navigate their lives. As Percy comes to understand the wider contexts of his disability throughout the series, the language he uses when discussing his ADHD and dyslexia shifts from self-defeating to extraordinarily dark. No longer is a D+ on a report card the worst that could happen to him: once he learns what his disability means, the biggest looming threat becomes death and the literal end of the world. In the third book, *The Titan's Curse*, we are introduced to a character named Rachel, who witnesses Percy slay a monster, and the monster fading into dust. She and Percy react with shock, not only because of the confronting imagery, but also because she was not supposed to witness it. Because of this ability, known in-text as Clear Sight, Percy brings Rachel to help him and Annabeth navigate the Labyrinth and find the inventor, Daedalus, at its centre. When she leads Percy through an arena within the labyrinth where he subsequently takes part in an impromptu death match against another minor god, she expresses guilt over putting him and Annabeth in such urgent danger. Percy attempts to comfort her by saying, "Hey, I'm usually about to die... Don't feel bad" (2008, pg 258). Because Percy and Rachel do not share the same critical consciousness when it comes to disability (and its wider implications in this universe), all Rachel can do is react with shock.

Another factor to consider here is the utilisation of humour as one of the key tropes seen in media with dyslexia representation. In his article discussing the way dyslexia is typically presented in media, using the *Percy Jackson* series and films as a case study, Phillip Kirby (2019) highlights the three main ways: as a joke, as a functional limitation, and as a 'gift'<sup>17</sup>. The *Percy Jackson* series makes use of all three, but as for the joke function in

---

<sup>17</sup> While dyslexia as functional limitation and 'gift' certainly plays a role in the series, I am choosing not to examine these too closely in this thesis as they go slightly beyond the scope of this research.

particular, it differs from other sources Kirby utilises (a wide range of adult contemporary, realist films) in his analysis in two main ways. The first being that the source of these tropes in the *Percy Jackson* series comes from dyslexic characters and are delivered to other dyslexic characters in a way which fosters a sense of solidarity. In the second book, Percy makes a throwaway comment about how “we could’ve been there all night while [Annabeth] tried to spell Cyclops” (Riordan, 2006, pg 103), but the comment is not malicious or derogatory in tone or delivery. The second way is because while the disabilities are presented as operating as they would in a real-life environment while Percy is in a ‘regular’ school environment, the *Percy Jackson* series is not grounded in reality. It is a fantasy series, and the disabilities which exist in the series are a product of that fantasy, as seen not only in regards to Percy and his demigod cohort, but also in the secondary characters, who navigate ephemeral states of disability due to their respective fantastical natures.

## **SECONDARY CHARACTER DISABILITY**

Secondary characters, Chiron<sup>18</sup>, and Grover Underwood both use disability to pass as human, and Annabeth Chase navigates her disabilities very differently to how Percy does his. Secondary characters with disabilities serves a twofold purpose in the text: one, it allows Percy to become more accepting of his own disabilities and of disability in general by observing a ‘mentor’ figure navigating the world smoothly and confidently, and two, it challenges the mentality that people with disabilities are passive, inactive participants in life. Percy employs active verbs to describe Mr. Brunner’s movements. Working in opposition to the passive language used by Partridge and Agnew quoted in chapter three (where characters are “imprisoned in [their] wheelchair”, “wheelchair-bound”, and “crippled”), Mr. Brunner

---

<sup>18</sup> Chiron is a centaur in Greek myth, and trainer to heroes. In the series, he is the overseer/trainer of the demigods at Camp Half-Blood.

“wheel[s] his chair into the doorway”, “toss[es]”, and “shout[s]” (2005, pg 13). While these characters do not exist in permanent states of disability, the verbs and adjectives used to describe their movements while using their mobility aids are indicative of the sort of feelings Percy possesses towards them both before their true identities are revealed.

Before we are formally introduced to Chiron, we know him as Mr. Brunner, the Latin teacher at Percy’s mortal school, there to surreptitiously keep an eye on Percy and ensure his abilities do not cause problems. Percy describes Mr Brunner as: “...this middle-aged guy in a motorised wheelchair... you wouldn’t think he’d be cool, but he told stories and jokes and let us play games in class... he was the only teacher whose classes didn’t put me to sleep” (2005, pg 2). Percy’s somewhat grudging respect for Mr. Brunner is evident in an in-class exchange they share, where Mr. Brunner asks Percy a question without Percy knowing the answer. Percy grows angry with Mr. Brunner for pushing him so hard in class, saying, “...Mr. Brunner expected me to be as good as everybody else... no, he didn’t expect me to be as *good*; he expected me to be *better*” (2005, pg 7). While Percy says this makes him angry, it is evident in his reactions that he is also disappointed to let Mr. Brunner down by not knowing the answers, and truly values his opinions. When Mr. Brunner attempts to comfort Percy after he is expelled again, telling Percy that his expulsion is “for the best”, that the school “wasn’t the best place for [him]”, and that he’s “not normal” (2005, pgs 21-22), Percy reacts with hurt and embarrassment. Mr. Brunner is positioned as possibly the first teacher to see the potential in Percy and try to bring it out. In contrast, Grover does not exist as a mentor figure, but as a reflection for Percy. At the outset of *The Lightning Thief*, Percy describes Grover as:

... an easy target... He was crippled. He had a note excusing him from PE for the rest of his life because he had some kind of muscular disease in his leg. He

walked funny, like every step hurt him, but don't let that fool you. You should've seen him run when it was enchilada day in the cafeteria (2005, pg 3).

Percy experiences a great deal of shame for being in a school for "troubled kids" (2005, pg 1) and describes the field trip to New York City that they are on at the outset of the novel as "twenty-eight mental-case kids and two teachers on a yellow bus" (pg 2). At lunchtime, he and Grover sit separate from the other kids on the field trip so "everybody wouldn't know that we were from *that* school — the school for loser freaks who couldn't make it elsewhere" (pg 8). In each case, Percy is counting himself and Grover among those descriptors, showing that Percy's perceptions of Grover are very similar to how Percy perceives himself simply because they are in the same school, which Percy assumes that Grover attends because he was held back several grades in a previous school (2005, pg 3). Before learning that Grover, a satyr, is wearing false feet to hide his hooves, rendering him unable to walk 'normally', Percy takes it upon himself to defend Grover from the school bullies, but cringes to do so. In Percy's eyes, he has forfeited any chance for popularity or friendship among his peers. When Percy learns that it is in fact Grover's role to protect Percy, and not the other way around, Percy reacts with shame and embarrassment.

"Why would I need you?"

It came out harsher than I meant it to.

Grover blushed right down to his Adam's apple. "Look, Percy, the truth is, I — I kind of have to protect you."

I stared at him.

All year long, I'd gotten into fights keeping bullies away from him. I'd lost sleep worrying that he'd get beaten up next year without me. And here he was acting like he was the one who defended me. (2005, pgs 24-25)

As the series progresses, and Percy grows more accepting of his disability and its wider implications, the language Percy uses to describe Grover shifts to admiration. At the conclusion of the first book, Percy describes Grover thusly:

I tried to feel happy for him. After all it wasn't every day a satyr got permission to go look for the great god Pan. But it was hard saying goodbye. I'd only known Grover for a year, yet he was my oldest friend... He gripped his walking stick and slung a backpack over his shoulder. He looked like any other hitchhiker you might see on an American highway — nothing like the little runty boy I used to defend from bullies at Yancy Academy (2005, pg 357).

Where Chiron and Grover serve as mentor and reflection respectively, Annabeth Chase, fellow demi-god, aspiring architect, talented tactician, and Percy's ultimate love interest, serves as a contrast. The way Annabeth embodies her disabilities differs greatly to how Percy embodies his. As a daughter of the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, Annabeth is already positioned as someone with above average intelligence and as a potential foil to the stereotypes<sup>19</sup> Percy is both subject to, and holds against other children who share his ADHD and dyslexia.

---

<sup>19</sup> The framing of Annabeth's disability may also serve to highlight the difference in how ADHD presents in females as opposed to males.

To me, it looked like: ATNYU MES GDERAN GOMEN MEPROIUM.

“What the heck does that say?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Annabeth said.

She loved reading so much, I’d forgotten she was dyslexic, too.

(Riordan, 2005, p 171)

At first, Percy reacts to this with surprise; Annabeth’s interest in and love for architecture, documentaries, and reading play at odds with the expectations Percy has for his disability and those who share it.

## **SUPERCRIIP IMPLICATIONS**

In the *Percy Jackson* series, “‘normality’ is challenged and even reversed, with disabled characters ultimately emerging as the most sympathetic and convincing characters, who teach the book’s assumed non-disabled young readers that disability should be considered as ‘normal’ as any other trait” (Meyer, 2013, pg 271). Ato Quayson defines the concept of Aesthetic Nervousness as the internal panic that may be experienced by a reader or viewer when disability forms part of a narrative (2007, pg 15). Similarly, Wheeler writes: “Between the lines of these [disability narratives] hovers an implied mainstream reader who may be reluctant to accept the world of a disabled narrator” (2019, pg 108). To combat this, the protagonist must deploy a number of techniques to prove that they are just like everyone else. To be a protagonist in a disability narrative, you must be able to win over your mainstream audience by asserting that you are witty, articulate, charming, and “not retarded” (Wheeler, 2019, pg 109). Employment of the derogatory R-word in this instance describes a form of strategic disembodiment, whereby one form of difference is distanced from to focus on another. To be more readily accepted as a narrator, the disabled protagonist asserts they are

not an R-word by positioning themselves as an “academic ‘supercrip’... an academic overachiever” (Wheeler, 2019, pg 109). These characters must be borderline superhuman<sup>20</sup>. In a similar vein, there is also potential for the series, and others like it, to be read as ‘inspiration porn’, a trope commonly seen in disability fiction wherein the protagonist with disabilities proves themselves to be an inspiration to others for performing tasks which some may believe to be otherwise insurmountable for a person with disabilities. This rhetoric, as discussed previously in chapter two, occurs when disabled people or protagonists are lauded as ‘superheroes’ for simply living their lives, or for the protagonist with disabilities to be viewed as having to go through various trials to prove their worth against non-disabled protagonists. Can a supercrip or inspiration porn reading be applied to the *Percy Jackson* series?

I discussed briefly in the second chapter how amplified abilities of some description is a staple convention of the fantasy genre, which means that reading supercrip implications in a work of fantasy becomes quite difficult. We expect our fantasy protagonist to be powerful or gain power through the course of the narrative; this is a staple of the Hero’s Journey structure. A supercrip reading then is difficult to apply to a narrative like *Percy Jackson*, where the entire cast of characters is disabled and saving the world while being so, all while the non-disabled population is not aware of any of it, because the supercrip reading relies on the narrative elevating the disabled character above all others for mundane reasons. While Percy is considered stronger by virtue of his status as a son of one of the Big Three gods (Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades), he is not positioned to be any better than any of the other demigod characters, some of whom are also children of the Big Three, and who are equally as

---

<sup>20</sup> Realistic novels make particular use of this trope, such as Nicola Yoon’s 2015 novel, *Everything, Everything*, Mark Haddon’s 2003 novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, and R. J Palacio’s 2012 novel, *Wonder*.

strong and disabled as he is. Percy is not proving himself to non-disabled characters. In the series, that superhero reading is far more literal; they are literally saving the world. And for the characters, this is par for the course: “I was about to relax. Everything felt perfect. Annabeth and I were okay. My mom and Paul had survived. Olympus was saved. But the life of a demigod is never so easy” (Riordan, 2013, pg 340). There is no single moment of rest. Monsters need to be defeated, cities and monuments saved, and Percy and his demigod cohort are the only ones who can do it.

For Percy himself, he is very quick to point out that he is not particularly smart — at least, not in an academic sense — though he does embody other qualities so often seen in protagonists with disabilities. He is funny, charming, witty, and very quick with a comeback, but the use of fantasy allows Percy not to fall back on intelligence to win over the reader as he might if this were a realist text, but on his magical abilities, with which he is extremely adept even without training. His skill at fighting earns him first a wary sort of admiration from the rest of the campers<sup>21</sup>, none of whom know what to make of Percy. When he successfully completes his mission to find and return Zeus’ stolen master lightning bolt, thus preventing an all-out war amongst the gods, Percy is hailed a hero by all. Throughout the series, Percy shows more and more remarkable abilities borne not only from his godly heritage, but also from his innate ability to lead and his remarkable selflessness. It is the fantasy-affected implications of his disability which frame his decision-making and allow him to have the success within the fantasy setting which he does. Percy is not a supercrip: he is a superhuman protagonist in a fantasy series, and this is not unique to disability.

---

<sup>21</sup> This occurs before Percy learns of his heritage as a child of Poseidon, as Poseidon was reluctant to claim Percy and put undue pressure on him, thus making his extraordinary abilities a given.



## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

It could be argued that every decision the half-bloods make in the texts are influenced by their disability and what their disability represents. In chapter two, I briefly discussed the Hero's Journey story structure as developed by Joseph Campbell, and its enduring role in the construction of fantasy narratives. I also made note of a quote from Elizabeth Wheeler, who remarked that fantasy disability narratives "take what others regard as weakness and redefine[s] them as part of the hero's journey" (2019, pg 4), meaning that a character's disability often acts as a sort of jumping-off point for some steps, or as a springboard for ethical, informed decision making. Throughout the series, the demigod characters are working to one collective goal that would not exist for them if the disability was not present. In this sense, while the series certainly borrows from and follows certain aspects of the Hero's Journey, it is perhaps not the disabled Hero's Journey which Wheeler posits. Through the reframing Riordan achieves in the series, it could be argued that the characters are not disabled at all. However, the use of fantasy and the Hero's Journey within disability narratives may prove to be more empowering than in realism narratives; while realist narratives may show the success of doing well in, for example, a school spelling test or other everyday trial, fantasy gives child readers with disabilities the chance to see themselves save the world. As Maria Nikolajeva notes:

... the spiritual growth of the protagonist can be presented more tangibly in terms of struggle of external magic forces than in terms of inner tension... fantasy can empower a child protagonist in a way that realistic prose is incapable of doing (2012, pg 61).

Fantasy offers larger-than-life solutions to everyday problems. It poses hard questions to young readers through a character they can view themselves as, and by seeing that character move through and solve these problems in mundane, everyday ways. For children reading this series who may have learning disabilities like ADHD or dyslexia, witnessing Percy defeat monsters and travel across the country while still interacting and dealing with his disabilities in ways which work for him, may indirectly parallel seeming insurmountable problems they are facing in their own lives. In short, fantasy works to inspire. In the same vein of Siebers' description of neurodiversity as a 'critical resource' cited earlier in this chapter, Riordan himself has stated that, "Making Percy ADHD and dyslexic was my way of honouring the potential of all the kids I've known who have those conditions. It's not a bad thing to be different. Sometimes, it's the mark of being very, very talented" ("An Interview with Rick Riordan", n.d). For readers who share the disability, seeing themselves in the characters they are reading may be the first time they are seeing a reflection, a moment of happiness and identification that they may not have had otherwise. And what an empowering moment of reflection to provide, for a child with learning disabilities to see someone just like them being portrayed as someone with the abilities to save and help others.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explored the construction of disability in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series in terms of context, theory, and genre. This included the text's position as both a commentary on the upswing of ADHD diagnoses and medication prescriptions of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and as a post 9/11 superhero narrative for children. I also discussed the series in terms of current disability theory, including the works of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on misfits and Misfitting, and Swain and French's affirmative model of disability, as well as how the text functions as a reflection of Vic Finkelstein's

thought experiment, *The Village*, in its reframing of the (disabled) demigod children being relied upon entirely by the mortal (non-disabled) public to be kept safe. I discussed how the series rejects supercrip and inspiration porn readings by setting the story in a world of fantasy, where abilities and heroics are expected conventions of the genre. Last, I discussed how the series functions simultaneously as a disability and fantasy narrative, satisfying the central tenants of both mediums to act as reflections of the time and context in which they are produced. The following chapter will reflect on the process of writing the novella, *Audrey Muffinstump and the Doors of Clover*, a novella which also attempts to explore the concepts and theories discussed here.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – REFLECTION**

In the previous chapter, I analysed the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series to examine how the use of the fantasy genre assists in the construction of the disabilities present in the text. I used concepts like the affirmative model of disability and misfitting to discuss how essential a setting like Camp Half-Blood is to the characters in the series, and argued against the text's potential to be read as a supercrip or inspiration porn narrative by discussing how the generic conventions of fantasy lead us to expect great things from fantasy protagonists.

This chapter moves on to reflect on and consider the process of writing a disability narrative in the fantasy genre for children. First, I will give a detailed synopsis for the novella, and a projected storyline for the series and why it was structured this way. Second, I move on to why I wanted to explore this kind of research, and why I wrote the novella as I did. Third, I will also discuss the various thoughts, theories, feedback, and research which went into its creation, influenced the writing, and informed the writing process. And last, I will address why certain decisions were made, such as the change from a third-person narrative to a first-person narrative, and how disability theory informed the editing work, particularly the works of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Staring.

The story follows Audrey Muffinstump, a twelve-year old girl born with only one leg. At the outset of the story, she is staying with her grandmother while her parents are away at a conference with the other heads of the remaining magical families to discuss an unknown threat compromising the upper, non-magical layer of the world, and what remains of the lower magical layer of the world. When word arrived via a note coded to Audrey that her parents have been taken, Audrey takes it upon herself to follow the code in the note and find

them. Along the way, she enlists the help of her sixteen-year old cousin, Tabitha, whose parents are also missing, and a stowaway named Jack, who inadvertently follows them through the magical layers between worlds. Together, they traverse different world cities and seas and volcanoes to find that a threat to both layers of the world isn't as dead as they thought, and he wants Audrey's help to bring the magical layer back to its former glory, never mind everyone else living in the non-magical layer.

As this novella is the first in a proposed series, it is not possible to convey the entirety of the future plot arc as it will expand over five books. I believe it is important to offer at least a rough idea for how the series would continue. The proposed direction of this series, quite broadly<sup>22</sup>, will involve Audrey unravelling the long-hidden secrets of her world and the people who built and ultimately ruined it.

Book two takes place close to a year after the events of the first and covers the course of the following year. Audrey's parents are back and she is living with them again while she continues to have lessons in magic with her grandmother, and Jack after his own latent abilities were discovered. As their abilities become more honed, the grandmother sends them on missions to retrieve various, seemingly random items, but neither Audrey nor Jack knows the value or the significance of the items they retrieve. Poultrygeist makes a return, albeit in a vastly weakened state, revealing that the only way Jack could have broken Poultrygeist's spells in the first book is if he is a descendant of Poultrygeist himself. Book three begins the night before Audrey's fourteenth birthday, with the sudden death of Audrey's grandmother. As the story wears, on, other people begin dying, all people who had connections to Poultrygeist in the past, all people who were particularly long-lived. The natural disasters in

---

<sup>22</sup> I will only be detailing major plot points here rather than a full, detailed synopsis.

the magical layer of the world become so dangerous and rendered the layer so unstable that Audrey and the other families leave. At the conclusion, Jack turns on Audrey and leaves with Poultrygeist. Book four has Audrey dealing with the aftermath of Jack's betrayal. She navigates life at a regular school in the regular world but finds it unsatisfying and lacking. Notes begin to arrive, short ones with dates and locations written on them. Audrey steals away from school and goes to the places, usually in the lower layer, finding sites of previous disasters now restored and thriving, with the mortal layer atop completely decimated. Book five, the finale, has Audrey turning sixteen<sup>23</sup> and gaining full use of her abilities. Unbeknownst to her, Jack has been working against Poultrygeist, weakening him from the inside. When Poultrygeist makes his final stand to completely restore the lower layer by destroying the mortal one and all the mortals with it, Jack reveals his deception, and he and Audrey work to defeat him together.

The novella operates differently to the analysis series, and indeed many other texts I have read, in that the protagonist is female. In my search for junior fantasy texts with protagonists with disabilities to analyse, and even in looking for books for myself, I have encountered very few texts, or series, with a female protagonist with a physical disability<sup>24</sup>. Even in wider media, including television and film, there is a disproportionate amount of male disabled protagonists over females. While it is important to note how few disability narratives for children feature a female protagonist, a comprehensive interrogation of gender and disability representation sits beyond the current scope of this project, which is focussing

---

<sup>23</sup> The progression of the stories over years, from pre-teen to teen years, as opposed to months or weeks does mean that the onset of puberty is a factor which will need to be considered in this further writing, and perhaps even the correlation between the onset and granting of supernatural abilities and the onset of puberty. However, this too is beyond the current scope of this research.

<sup>24</sup> Though they often appear in works of YA fiction.

on how the fantasy genre can be used to tell disability narratives regardless of the gender of the protagonist.

I stated in the introductory chapter that my decision for starting on this line of academic inquiry stemmed from the fact that I did not often encounter representations of disability in works of popular, contemporary junior fantasy fiction, let alone fantasy series. As my research and reading demonstrated, as quoted in chapter two, “the effort to represent is inevitably fraught with politics” (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, pg 40). Depicting disability in a story is not a simple matter of taking a character with disabilities and writing them into that environment without caution or foresight. In a similar vein, Abbye Meyer writes that “...because adolescent characters offer insight into early experiences of disability as identity, adolescent characters with disabilities illustrate ways in which disability has been and may be understood both as a literary trope and a political identity” (2013, pg 269). To write characters with disabilities in a way that is thoughtful, considerate, and ethical, a thorough understanding of disability as both a political and social identity is required. With this in mind, I explored further the theory around both disability and children’s fiction, and I began to understand that texts which feature disability are extending a culturally specific commentary on the way disability is presented, acknowledged, and interacted with. It is precisely this which makes the process of creating a disability narrative somewhat nerve-wracking, accompanied by a constant stream of worrying questions: Am I writing this correctly? Am I being sensitive enough? Am I allowed to write this? Should I be writing this? To answer these questions, I sought the advice of other authors who had written disability narratives of any genre for children. For Joseph Elliot, author of the 2020 novel, *The Good Hawk*, writing the protagonist, Agatha, a girl who has Down’s Syndrome was obvious for him as a special education teacher, but he also made use of three sensitivity readers to ensure

the portrayal was as authentic as possible (Elliot, 2020). Penny Tangey, author of the 2020 junior novel, *As Fast As I Can*, wrote a protagonist named Vivian who loves to run, and has a hereditary heart condition called long QT syndrome. Tangey herself does not have a heart condition, but in writing her novel, she interviewed a cardiologist who went over the symptoms and treatments, and kept a list of every mention of long QT syndrome in her novel and fact-checked each and every one, leaving a reference list at the end of the book (Tangey, 2020). In my case, I began more introspectively and later moved out, researching as much as I could and concluding that I will learn quickly if I am not depicting Audrey's disability sensitively enough. Authors every day write and publish works containing characters who are different to them in every possible way, so why would I not be able to, as well. Recently, I read a post on social media in regards to writing transgender characters when the author does not identify as transgender, where Tumblr user 'quasi-normalcy' (2020) stated that while authors should certainly try to do as much research as they can, they likely will not get everything correct, and that the effort to represent well, even if it does miss something, is more appreciated than no effort at all<sup>25</sup>. This notion, while certainly simplistic, has been immeasurably helpful in answering my own questions and moving past my doubts: if I am making a true effort to represent well, with no ill will or malicious intent, then that ought to be enough. However, this is only applicable from a personal standpoint to assuage personal doubts, and further reading and research on the social and cultural implications of disability in fiction was required.

Tobin Siebers' idea of Complex Embodiment, the idea that disability is both a biological issue and a social one, and that many disabled people straddle the line between the social and medical aspects of their disability daily, was incredibly helpful to read during the

---

<sup>25</sup> Tom Shakespeare addressed this point in his chapter "Art and Lies? Representations of Disability on Film" in *Disability Discourse* (1999)



writing process. Art historian and academic, Amanda Cachia, writes of Complex Embodiment as being able to offer “layers of inquiry and take us down an unconventional path, so that categories of difference, identity, and disadvantage in relationship to disability can no longer be essentialized” (2017, pg 68). By taking the quest to find her parents and leaving her grandmother’s home, Audrey achieves a level of independence thus far unfamiliar to her. A non-disabled character might leave home for an adventure without much thought, but for a disabled protagonist, this is not the case. I do not make this statement to be dismissive of children with or without disabilities, I make it in recognition of the complex embodiment of characters with disabilities in fantasy fiction, where journeys into worlds they may misfit may still be an issue for them. Audrey does not know what her journey will have in store for her, where it will take her, or if it will accommodate her the way she needs as someone who wears a prosthesis, so she prepares for her journey accordingly. I attempted to show this in my novella, when Audrey is preparing to leave and packing items she knows she will need to care for her prosthetic without thought – it is second nature to her. She needs to consider how she is going to maintain care for the site of her leg which is in constant contact with her prosthesis. She needs to consider proper cleaning and possible pain relief. She needs to consider how she might maintain her prosthesis in an environment where she may not always have the supplies she needs on hand, regardless of how prepared she thinks she is. This is just a fact of life for Audrey, it is not emphasised within the narrative, nor presented as inspirational or superhuman. While she demonstrates recklessness in leaving her grandmother’s home to find her parents, she always remains practical regarding her disability.

When thinking along these lines, I also considered junior fiction’s reliance on the notion of power, and power imbalances. At its core, junior fiction is primarily concerned with

power (Nikolajeva, 2012, p 51) and the negotiation of it. For children, life is full of perceived power imbalances: between child and parent, child and authority figure, child and bully, and even child and sibling. Because of these imbalances, a child character is usually given, or denied, agency through their relationships to the other characters and even the environment around them. When considered alongside disability, this idea of power takes on a twofold meaning: not only does the character have to contend with external factors hindering their success, but internal ones, too; perhaps their bodies do not allow them the same freedoms that a child without disabilities may have. I did not want my story to be ignorant of the realities of disability and its complex embodiment. As I stated in the second chapter, the use of authentic disability portrayals in fantasy works to both normalise disability in fiction, and shape the views a child reader may form towards disability. However, Colin Barnes (1992) made the observation that ‘disability as normal’ storylines as can be just as problematic as storylines which do make you of damaging stereotypes in that “if disabled people are perceived as 'normal' then there is little need for policies to bring about a society free from disablism” (pg 19). Similarly, Alison Wilde (2020) argues that:

‘Critical analysis’ needs to go further in interrogating notions of realism and ‘the real’, paying close attention to personal/phenomenological, embodied and cultural contexts of viewing. So, far from spurning ‘stereotypical images’, stereotypes will be seen to carry important truths about societal discourses on disability, often related to significant cultural narratives of impairment and disability (pg 18).

While Wilde calls for analysis that moves beyond attempts towards realistic representations of disability, my aim in engaging with the fantasy genre was to show that it is an effective vehicle for telling disability narratives which reflect the time and contexts of production,

regardless of whether those times and contexts reflect ‘positively’ or ‘negatively’ on disability. Throughout the writing process, I was influenced by Riordan’s authentic, fun, and almost playful takes on disability and disability narratives. Riordan acknowledges that disability and stigma exists, and actively works against it to show that Percy and his disabled demigod cohort, as characters within a fantasy narrative, are capable of insurmountable good that not everyone else is capable of. This was something I wanted to include in my novella, too; in the universe I created within the novella, Audrey is the person most uniquely suited to the journey to save her parents. In writing *Audrey Muffinstump*, it was not my intention to enforce an ableist perspective wherein just because it is not a large factor in this story, that Audrey’s disability (both physical and embodied) does not matter, or that more work does not need to be done. It was my aim to show that a character with disabilities could lead a story just as well as their non-disabled counterparts.

The secondary characters, Tabitha and Jack, navigate disability of sorts as well. Tabitha’s moderate social anxiety taints her experiences of the different parts of the world she, Jack, and Audrey visit, while Jack experiences a state of ephemeral disability with his broken arm in a brace. However, unlike the very deliberate roles the characters of Mr. Brunner and Grover play in the *Percy Jackson* series, Audrey and Jack’s roles are there to highlight the overall mundanity of the world<sup>26</sup>. To make only one character disabled and the rest all completely neurotypical and non-disabled ignores the incredibly diverse world we live in. As Audrey’s world is, through most of the story, a reflection of the actual world, it only seemed appropriate to have the secondary characters reflective of this diverse nature, too.

---

<sup>26</sup> Even though the story takes place in an unreal world, authentic depictions of disability are still crucial. In the real world, it is estimated that at least ten percent of the world’s population, or roughly 650,000,000 people, has a disability of some kind, making the disabled community the worlds’ largest minority group (“Disability World - Statistics”, 2019).

Regarding the magic of the world, the decision to give Audrey the ability to ‘move’ through water was due to two factors: the need for Audrey to have some kind of agency related to the way she was able to move that was not reliant on her prosthetic, and as part of a much larger fantasy convention. Fantasy studies academic, Catherine Butler, notes that the gaining of a magical ability within a fantasy narrative can work as part of a coming-of-age arc for the character (2009, pg 225), in the same vein as Harry Potter gaining full, if monitored, use of his magic at age eleven, or the Pevensie siblings in the *Chronicles of Narnia* being gifted their respective magical objects to fight against the White Witch. Audrey will not gain the use of a magic wand until she turns sixteen, in accordance with the rules set out in my novella, but the gaining of an ability to be used to save her parents is one that operates as a sort of signifier of impending adulthood and new responsibilities<sup>27</sup>.

Structurally, the story underwent several changes, but the key change was the rewrite to change it from a third person narrative into a first-person narrative. Early drafts of this story were written in the third person to maintain a sense of authorial distance from the disability I was writing. As a person without physical disabilities, I did not believe it would be genuine or authentic of me to use ‘I’. However, I opted to change the story from third person to first, losing that distance previously created, but gaining the closeness and intimacy that the third person narrative lacked. Below are side-by-side comparisons of the opening paragraph of chapter one, and another scene in chapter six, to show the difference changing the tenses made:

### **Chapter One opening – Third Person POV**

---

<sup>27</sup> While this coming-of-age aspect of the story certainly lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading, this again falls beyond the current scope of this research.

“For the last time, Audrey, pay attention!”

Her grandma raps her wand against the edge of Audrey’s desk like she’s about to start an epic drum solo. Audrey jumps in her seat and knocks her knees against the underside of the table, sending her notebooks and pencils flying.

Her grandma glares at Audrey as though she’s committed some horrible crime against humanity. Audrey assumes the expression comes naturally to all teachers. “These lessons are part of your heritage! Your history! They’re important.”

### **Chapter One opening – First Person POV**

The house is infested. Again.

My fault, since I’m the one who keeps feeding them. Pretty sure Grandma’s on to me, too, ‘cause she’s glaring at me in that way that says, **I know what you’re up to**. Not that it’s a new way of looking at me or anything like that. I’m not sure what the big deal is. How anyone could think these tiny fairies are a nuisance?

I elected to share these two excerpts to highlight the importance of an engaging opening scene. One of the key things creative writers are taught is that the first sentence, paragraph, and chapter need to have something about them which hooks a reader in, be it through voice, action, or otherwise. This is particularly important in regards to children’s fiction, where one of the aims is to create lifelong readers. While there is not an especially profound change in these two excerpts, the first-person version carries more of Audrey’s voice across than the third-person version; there is a greater hook in the first-person that is not present in the third-person version.

### **Chapter six scene – First Person POV**

I slide my backpack off my shoulder and dump it on the ground. It's like my leg gives up right then, too, because I slide down the wall and land on the paved ground in a mangled heap.

I wince as I unlatch all the bits and pieces holding my prosthetic to my body. Jack watches me out the corner of his eye. Whenever I glance over, he looks away like something shiny caught his eye.

"You can ask, if you want," I say.

### **Chapter six scene – Third Person POV**

Audrey slides her backpack off her shoulder and dumps it on the ground. She follows it, sliding her back against the smooth wall.

She winces as she unlatches all the bits and pieces holding her prosthetic to her body. She rummages about in her backpack for the nice baby wipes that don't leave a rash on her skin.

Jack watches her out the corner of his eye as she cleans herself off. Whenever she glances over, he looks away like something shiny caught his eye.

"You can ask, if you want," she says.

I chose to highlight this section because it was one which was influenced by the theory I consumed during the writing process, particularly Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of staring. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, as quoted in chapter two, defines staring as disengaged looking, opposed to engaged looking, where the starrer (giver) observes the staree (recipient) to discern what is 'wrong' with them (2009, pg 3). Garland-Thomson also discusses the idea

of ‘stare-management’: “Starees must insist on recognition as fellow humans by wielding an array of interpersonal techniques that the commonly embodied need not acquire” (2009, pg 87). In this interaction between Audrey and Jack, Audrey witnesses Jack watching her remove her prosthesis for the night, in what is the first instance of Jack noticing her disability. To seize control of the situation, Audrey calls attention to the stare, and tells him to ask if he wants to, controlling how the situation plays out and ultimately ends.

The last point I would like to address is an instance within my story where Audrey is offered the opportunity to be given a new leg. I did not believe it would be appropriate to include a disabled character in a magically unlimited fantasy setting without acknowledging this potential<sup>28</sup>. Beckett, Elison, et al (2011) state that a degree of caution is required when writing disability in fantasy environments, “particularly where the depiction of the fantastic includes miracle cures for what are, in reality, permanent impairments” (pg 380). While the possibility of this to happen does exist within the scope of the story, I did not believe it would be the right choice from a reading, narrative, or ethical standpoint to have Audrey accept the offer, even if this would play into the generic conventions of fantasy. Even the ultimate decision to have Audrey consider the offer was not a choice made lightly. Internet studies and disability academic, Katie Ellis (2015) states:

Instead of dividing the representation of disability into a positive and negative binary opposition, it is important that we see people with disability along the full spectrum of human experience and popular culture characterisation – as good,

---

<sup>28</sup> Neil Gaiman’s *Odd and the Frost Giants*, acknowledges this potential by having Odd’s leg ‘treated’ by the goddess, Freya, in return for saving Asgard from the Frost Giants and saving Odin, Thor, and Loki from being trapped as animals. This caused some controversy among readers, who read it as a ‘miracle cure’. However, others read it as making full use of the world and the magic in it.

bad, right, wrong, strong and weak. There needs to be moments where disability is relevant and irrelevant. (Ellis, pg 8)

As much as I wanted to portray Audrey as a positive influence for children with disabilities, who is comfortable with her body and its limitations, I also wanted to portray her as a girl with insecurities who yearns to fit in, as someone who exists on that full spectrum of human experience and has both a positive and negative relationship with her disability.

This chapter examined the process of crafting a disability narrative for children by reflecting on the kinds of obligations and bases of knowledge an author of these kinds of narratives requires. This requires an understanding of the social and cultural constructions of disability, as well as a sound knowledge on how to write for children to begin with. I discussed how I see the eventual series playing out from here, how my personal concerns played into the writing and how I navigated them, how theorists like Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson influenced the writing process, and why I believed it best to rewrite the story from a third-person narrative, to a first person-narrative. The following chapter is the conclusion, where I will be discussing my final findings after both the analysis of *Percy Jackson* and the writing of *Audrey Muffinstump*, discussing the implications for the combined fields of literary disability studies and fantasy fiction studies, and offering potential sites of future research.



## **CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION**

This research investigated the question: how does the use of the fantasy genre aid in the construction of disability in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series? I explored a number of texts, concepts, theories which allowed me to answer this question by way of analysis of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series by Rick Riordan, a children's fantasy series released between 2005-09 featuring a diverse cast of characters, all with either ADHD, Dyslexia, or both, and by writing my own fantasy novella with themes of disability. Disability within fantasy texts (or any other text) is almost guaranteed to provoke discussion. While some children's fantasy texts (and many adult texts, as well) featuring disability can present somewhat questionable endings through their use of cure/miracles and other misguided characterisations, other texts twist the fantasy elements of their stories to their advantage.

The use of fantasy in the *Percy Jackson* series provides a powerful tool for reframing our understanding of learning disabilities that may not have been possible within a realistic narrative. In the school system today, all children with learning disabilities are misfits. They exist within a system which lacks the tools and knowledge to nurture them properly. This series offers a new lens through which to consider our understandings: what could Percy, and other children with learning disabilities, be capable of in a setting which nurtured them instead of guilting them? Similarly, what would children like Audrey be capable of if they were not perceived as helpless and in constant need of assistance? The fantasy genre is a powerful format for the exploration of these questions, because fantasy magnifies everything. Through the lens of the *Percy Jackson* series, children with these disabilities are not disabled: they are heroes, they are necessary, and they are crucial to the survival of the world, and they just need to find the right environment to fit them and their needs properly. This ties back to

Swain and French's affirmative model, which calls for the assertion of pride in one's disability. Fantasy, in this case, guides readers with and without disability to question the social and cultural constructions of disability. It demonstrates to the reader with learning disabilities like those presented in the series that, despite what they and others may believe about their disabilities, that their perceived limitations were imposed on them by a disabling society. It shows children without disabilities that there are other ways to think about and interact with the world. While the actions of the ADHD and dyslexic cast of the series may be quite hyperbolic in nature, the overall message of inclusion and respect is not.

I discussed in the literature review the idea that so much of what makes this line of inquiry work is passion. People who are researching these texts, or simply discussing them in online forums do so because there is something at stake for them. I chose to analyse the *Percy Jackson* series, and write my own novella emulating the themes present in it, because I love the series. My stake is not biographical, or overly personal. I have approached this research as someone who loves reading books with misfit themes, loves writing fiction for young people, and wants to ensure that the information presented in such texts is as sensitive, compassionate, ethical, and fair as possible. I want this research to continue in the vein of academic works like that of Elizabeth Wheeler and Patricia Dunn, but I want the novel to reach the sort of passionate audience who will discuss and dissect it with the same voracity that other junior and YA novels are afforded.

This thesis argues that fantasy is a powerful vehicle through which to tell disability narratives. Despite the genre's reliance on somewhat questionable tropes<sup>29</sup>, to which even

---

<sup>29</sup> Though these questionable tropes can provide insight into changing socio-cultural constructions of disability (see Wilde 2020 for an in-depth discussion)

*Percy Jackson* was not immune, the construction of disability within the series is something which forces the reader to ask questions of themselves. Disability narratives written in realism may portray relatively mundane successes (though likely not mundane to the character) which perhaps suggest that the character ought to be admired as an unlikely success. In fantasy, we ask ourselves what a child with disabilities could accomplish if the appropriate social structures were in place. Further work from a CLDS perspective will be required as more informed, thoughtful, and interesting fantasy disability narratives are written and published.

I have argued throughout this thesis that disability narratives for children within the fantasy genre are few, as is the academic inquiry, but it is a growing area. This could be due to a number of factors. In the literature review, I discussed both the growing social media presence among authors, readers, and influencers in discussing diverse narratives. It has become vastly easier to access the resources needed to write diverse narratives, and to seek assistance and reassurance if needed. In the reflection chapter, I mentioned Siebers' Complex Embodiment, a concept indicative of the growing intersection of the medical and social approaches to disability, and an overall shift in the tone of disability studies to include more biographical material. Quite simply, too, writing diversely now is actively encouraged among authors. In our wider culture, there has been a stark rejection of narratives which are viewed as too heteronormative, with only non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual, and white bodies, and a greater push to include narratives which feature disabled, LGBTQIA+, and non-white bodies, too (see Algrim, 2020; Thompson and Obenson, 2020; Black, 2019; Hay, n.d).

The research on how fantasy can be used in disability narratives for children is still a question which is emerging, but a fascinating one, nonetheless. There were many questions

which appeared over the course of the research process that were simply beyond the scope of this project currently which, interestingly to reflect on now, began with my childhood love of a fantasy story where a girl pretends to be a boy. The most pressing of which regarding this research involves the intersection of gender, genre, and disability in narratives for children, to better understand the strange pattern of assigning non-physical disabilities to female characters, and physical disabilities to male characters which appears largely dependent on genre. This is a question I personally look forward to considering as I take this line of inquiry further.

My research question asked how fantasy constructs disability, but I believe I got it the wrong way around. In the hands of the right author, fantasy absolutely works to *deconstruct* disability. Very little of what we expect from a child with learning disabilities like ADHD or dyslexia is present in the *Percy Jackson* series, and it was a point of mine to present very little of what we expect from children with physical disabilities in my novella, too. Fantasy offers the chance to strip back disability from a character, but not remove it, in a setting where the disability may mean far more. It allows us to see the character underneath, how they solve problems, how they move through a world that may or may not be prepared for them. This is the true power of fantasy.

## WORKS REFERENCED

- Ahlgrim, C. (2020). 47 of the most groundbreaking LGBTQ characters and relationships on TV. Retrieved 18 September 2020, from <https://www.insider.com/best-lgbtq-characters-gay-relationships-on-tv-2019-6>
- An Interview With Rick | Rick Riordan. Retrieved 24 October 2019, from <http://rickriordan.com/about/an-interview-with-rick/>
- Austin, S., & Chandler, K. (2016). African American Genre Crossings. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 41(4), 341-342. doi: 10.1353/chq.2016.0042
- Barnes, C. (1992). *DISABLING IMAGERY AND THE MEDIA*. Halifax, UK: The British Council of Organisations of Disabled People.
- Bakhtin, M., & Emerson, C. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (pp. 122-132). Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barker, C., & Murray, S. (2018). Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature. In C. Barker & S. Murray, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (pp. 1-13). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Beckett, A., Ellison, N., Barrett, S., & Shah, S. (2010). 'Away with the fairies?' Disability within primary-age children's literature. *Disability & Society*, 25(3), 373-386. doi: 10.1080/09687591003701355
- Biederman, J., Monuteaux, M., Mick, E., Spencer, T., Wilens, T., & Klein, K. et al. (2006). Psychopathology in Females with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: A Controlled, Five-Year Prospective Study. *Biological Psychiatry*, 60(10), 1098-1105. doi: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2006.02.031

- Black, M. (2019). Yes, You Should Be Afraid to Write “Diverse” Characters. Retrieved 18 September 2020, from <https://curiosityneverkilledthewriter.com/yes-you-should-be-afraid-to-write-diverse-characters-4a6c482a7379>
- Blaska, J. (2004). Children's Literature That Includes Characters With Disabilities or Illnesses. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v24i1.854
- Bruns, A. (2008) Gatewatching and News Curation Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere. New York City, USA: Peter Lang Inc.
- Butler, C. (2012). Modern Children's Literature. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (pp. 224-235). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Byers, M. (2018). Who (the) Girls and Boys Are: Gender Nonconformity in Middle-Grade Fiction. *Girlhood Studies*, 11(1), 92-107. doi: 10.3167/ghs.2018.110108
- Cachia, A. (2017). The Flesh of the World: An Empirical Turn toward Complex Embodiment. *Art Journal*, 76(3-4), 68-75. doi: 10.1080/00043249.2017.1418488
- Callus, A. (2019). The Cloak of Incompetence. *Journal Of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 13(2), 177-194. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2018.42
- Cameron, C. (2011). Disability Arts: From the Social Model to the Affirmative Model. Retrieved 1 September 2020, from <https://www.abladeofgrass.org/articles/disability-arts-social-model-affirmative-model/>
- Cameron, C., & Moore, M. (2014). Disability Studies. In C. Cameron, *Disability Studies: A Student's Guide*. London, UK: Sage Publications, Ltd. Retrieved from <http://sk.sagepub.com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/Books/disability-studies>

- Campbell, J. (1949). *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. New York City, USA: Pantheon Books.
- Cardosa, A., & de Regino, S. (2016). 'PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS': MYTH, LITERATURE AND EDUCATION. *Cadernos De Letras Da UFF*, 26(52).
- Cheyne, R. (2018). Disability in Genre Fiction. In C. Barker & S. Murray, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (pp. 185-198). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheyne, R. (2013). Disability Studies Reads the Romance. *Journal Of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 7(1), 37-52. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2013.3
- Cignarella, M. (2015). *In Defense of Magic: Using Fantasy Literature in the Classroom* (Master of Arts - English). Stony Brook University.
- Cruz, M., Pollock, K., Meyer, R., Short, K., & Johnson, K. (2004). Stepping into the Wardrobe: A Fantasy Genre Study. *Language Arts*, 81(3), 184-195.
- Dahlen, S. (2017). A Step from Heaven: On Being a Woman of Color in Children's Literature Studies. *The Lion And The Unicorn*, 41(1), 82-92. doi: 10.1353/uni.2017.0005
- Davila, D., & Volz, A. (2017). "That Sh\*t Is Rude!" Religion, Picture Books, and Social Narratives in Middle School. *Middle Grades Review*, 3(3), 1-15.
- de Almeida, M., & Teodoro, T. (2018). PERCY JACKSON E O LADRÃO DE RAIOS: PROPOSTA DE ATIVIDADE DE MULTILETRAMENTO E DE DIALOGISMO. *Entreletras*, 9(3), 277-289.

- DePalma, R. (2016). Gay penguins, sissy ducklings ... and beyond? Exploring gender and sexuality diversity through children's literature. *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education*, 37(6), 828-845. doi: 10.1080/01596306.2014.936712
- Disability Statistics: Information, Charts, Graphs and Tables. (2019). Retrieved 18 November 2019, from <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/>
- Dorfman, N. (2006). "Attention Grabbers". *Medical Marketing And Media*, 41(6), 62-63, 65-66.
- Dudek, D. (2018). Seeing the Human Face: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Narratives and an Ethics of Care in Recent Australian Picture Books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 43(4), 363-376. doi: 10.1353/chq.2018.0044
- Dunn, P. (2015). *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature*. New York, USA: Peter Lang.
- Elliott, J. (2020). Joseph Elliott on The Good Hawk and writing a protagonist with Down's syndrome. Retrieved 3 March 2020, from <https://www.booktopia.com.au/blog/2020/02/06/joseph-elliott-on-the-good-hawk-and-writing-a-protagonist-with-downs-syndrome/>
- Ellis, K. (2015). *Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance*. Burlington, USA: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Fabrizi, M. (2017). *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: SensePublishers.
- Finkelstein, V. (1975). To Deny or Not to Deny Disability - What is disability? | Independent Living Institute. Retrieved 18 March 2020, from <https://www.independentliving.org/docs1/finkelstein.html>



Fraser, B. (2016). *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*. New York City, USA: Columbia University Press.

Frenzied Flipping From Topic to Topic. (2020, August 3rd). What I can tell you as a transgender woman... [Tumblr post]. Retrieved from <https://quasi-normalcy.tumblr.com/post/625358191872688128/what-i-can-tell-you-as-a-transgender-woman-is-that>

Fuller, A., & Hendry, J. (2019). Teen Matters - when sport is all that matters [Podcast]. Retrieved 21 September 2019, from <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/teen-matters---when-sport-is-all-that-matters/11493116>

Gajaria, A., Yeung, E., Goodale, T., & Charach, A. (2011). Beliefs About Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Response to Stereotypes: Youth Postings in Facebook Groups. *Journal Of Adolescent Health*, 49(1), 15-20. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.09.004

Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2009). *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2011). Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept. *Hypatia*, 26(3), 591-609. doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x

Gelder, K. (2016). *New Directions in Popular Fiction: Genre, Distribution, Reproduction*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gender Differences in ADHD | ADHD Boys vs Girls | Child Mind Institute. Retrieved 13

October 2019, from <https://childmind.org/guide/a-teachers-guide-to-adhd-in-the-classroom/how-are-girls-with-adhd-different-from-boys/>

Gervay, S. (2004). Butterflies: Youth Literature as a Powerful Tool in Understanding Disability. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v24i1.844

Glenn, W., & King-Watkins, D. (2019). Being an Athlete or Being a Girl: Selective Identities among Fictional Female Athletes Who Play with the Boys. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 44(3), 290-309. doi: 10.1353/chq.2019.0034

Goodley, D. (2011). *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Goodley, D. (2013). Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 28(5), 631-644. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2012.717884

Gray, P. (2017). Join the Club: African American Children's Literature, Social Change, and the Chicago Defender Junior. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 42(2), 149-168. doi: 10.1353/chq.2017.0014

Grenby, M., & Reynolds, K. (2011). *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, M. (2019). Critical Disability Theory. Retrieved 30 August 2020, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-critical/>

Hames-Garcia, M. (2011). *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity*. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

- Harnum, M., Duffy, J., & Ferguson, D. (2006). Adults' Versus Children's Perceptions of a Child with Autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *Journal Of Autism And Developmental Disorders*, 37(7), 1337-1343. doi: 10.1007/s10803-006-0273-0
- Hawkes, L., & Kanake, S. (2019). Structural boundaries that effect the representation of gender and disability in works of fiction from the United States and United Kingdom. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(10), 1459-1471. doi: 10.1080/0966369x.2018.1553855
- Hay, L. How To Write Diverse Characters 'Right'. Retrieved 18 September 2020, from <https://scriptangel.com/write-diverse-characters-right/>
- Hayes, M., & Black, R. (2003). Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 23(2). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v23i2.419
- Helmsling, M. (2019). Disability Plots: Curriculum, Allegory, & History. *Journal Of Curriculum Theorizing*, 34(1), 110-116.
- Hermann-Wilmarth, J., & Ryan, C. (2016). Queering chapter books with LGBT characters for young readers: recognizing and complicating representations of homonormativity. *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education*, 37(6), 846-866. doi: 10.1080/01596306.2014.940234
- Heyman, A. (2018). What do young adult carers learn through supporting family members? Extending the affirmation model. *Disability & Society*, 33(8), 1191-1211. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2018.1481014

- Hilbun, J. (2009). The Role of Protestant Christianity in Young Adult Realistic Fiction. *Journal Of Religious & Theological Information*, 7(3-4), 181-201. doi: 10.1080/10477840903103481
- Hile, R. (2009). Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29(4).
- Holmes, M. (2010). *Fictions of Affliction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hurst, R. (2003). The International Disability Rights Movement and the ICF. *Disability And Rehabilitation*, 25(11-12), 572-576. doi: 10.1080/0963828031000137072
- Hutcheon, L. (2004). On the Art of Adaptation. *Daedalus*, 133(2), 108-111.
- Identity-first vs person-first language – People with Disability Australia. Retrieved 18 September 2020, from <https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/language-guide/identity-vs-person/>
- Immel, A., Knoepfmacher, U., & Briggs, J. (2009). Fantasy's Alternate Geography for Children. In M. Grenby & A. Immel, *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (pp. 226-241). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, R. (2003). *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (8th ed.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Jacobson, R. How Girls With ADHD Are Different. Retrieved 13 October 2019, from <https://childmind.org/article/how-girls-with-adhd-are-different/>
- James, E., & Mendlesohn, F. (2012). Introduction. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (pp. 1-4). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- James, K. (2009). *Death, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*. New York, USA: Routledge.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press.
- Keith, L. (2004). What Writers Did Next: Disability, Illness and Cure in books in the Second Half of the 20th Century. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v24i1.845
- Kidd, K. (2011). Queer Theory's Child and Children's Literature Studies. *PMLA*, 126(1), 182-188. doi: 10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.182
- Kirby, P. (2019). Gift from the gods? Dyslexia, popular culture and the ethics of representation. *Disability & Society*, 34(9-10), 1573-1594. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2019.1584091
- Knoepflmacher, U. (2009). Children's Texts and the Grown-Up Reader. In M. Grenby & A. Immel, *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (pp. 159-173). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kraayenoord, C. (2011). Movies and Disability: Positive impact or harm?. *International Journal Of Disability, Development And Education*, 58(2), 103-106. doi: 10.1080/1034912x.2011.570491
- Lerer, S. (2008). *Children's Literature: A Reader's History From Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.
- Markotic, N., & Chivers, S. (2010). *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Columbus, USA: Ohio State University Press.
- Mathews, R. (2011). *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. New York, USA: Routledge.

- Maund, K. (2012). Reading the Fantasy Series. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (pp. 147-153). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- McCort, J. (2016). *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*. Oxford, USA: University of Mississippi Press.
- McDaniel, J. (2016). "You can point a finger at a zombie. Sometimes they fall off.": Contemporary Zombie Films, Embedded Ableism, and Disability as Metaphor. *The Midwest Quarterly*, 57(4), 423-446.
- McDermott, S. (2019). The Tomboy Tradition: Taming Adolescent Ambition from 1869 to 2018. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 44(2), 134-155. doi: 10.1353/chq.2019.0022
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Toronto, CAN: McGraw-Hill.
- Meyer, A. (2013). "But she's not retarded": Contemporary Adolescent Literature Humanizes Disability but Marginalizes Intellectual Disability. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38(3), 267-283. doi: 10.1353/chq.2013.0035
- Miller, E. (2016). Literate Misfitting: Disability Theory and a Sociomaterial Approach to Literacy. *Urbana*, 79(1), 34-56.
- Minich, J. (2016). Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now. *Lateral*, 5(1). doi: 10.25158/15.1.9
- Mitchell, D., & Snyder, S. (1997). *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*. Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.

- Mitchell, D., & Snyder, S. (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Mogk, M. (2013). *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television*. Jefferson, USA: McFarland & Company.
- Moody, N. (2008). Methodological agendas: Disability-informed criticism and the incidental representation of autism in popular fiction. *Popular Narrative Media*, 1(1), 25-41. doi: 10.3828/pnm.1.1.5
- Morey, A., & Nelson, C. (2015). "A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers": Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars. *The Lion And The Unicorn*, 39(3), 235-253. doi: 10.1353/uni.2015.0025
- Mugijatna, Habsari, S., & Putri, Y. (2014). Rick Riordan's Intention in Writing Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief and the Reception of the Readers. *K@Ta*, 16(2). doi: 10.9744/kata.16.2.77-86
- Nichols, C. (2018). Fishlegs's Journey: Acknowledged and Unacknowledged Stigma in the How to Train Your Dragon Book Series. *Journal Of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 12(3), 353-368. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2018.27
- Nikolaidis, A. (2013). (En)Gendering Disability in Film. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(4), 759-764. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2013.805593
- Nikolajeva, M. (2002). *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*. Maryland, USA: Scarecrow Press Inc.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2012). *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. London, UK: Routledge.

- Nikolajeva, M. (2012). The Development of Children's Fantasy. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (pp. 50-61). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Northern, M. (2015). Book Review — Disabling Characters (Patricia Dunn). Retrieved 5 February 2020, from [http://www.wordgathering.com/past\\_issues/issue34/reviews/dunn.html](http://www.wordgathering.com/past_issues/issue34/reviews/dunn.html)
- Nussbaum, N. (2011). ADHD and Female Specific Concerns. *Journal Of Attention Disorders*, 16(2), 87-100. doi: 10.1177/1087054711416909
- O'Keefe, D. (2004). *Readers in Wonderland: The Liberating Worlds of Fantasy Fiction: From Dorothy to Harry Potter*. New York, USA: Continuum.
- Oliver, M. (2013). The social model of disability: thirty years on. *Disability & Society*, 28(7), 1024-1026. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2013.818773
- Palacio, R. (2012). *Wonder*. London, UK: Penguin Random House.
- Partridge, J., & Agnew, K. (2001). "Disability". In V. Watson, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (p. 209). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Place, F. (2019). *Portrait of an Artist's Mother*. North Geelong, Australia: Spinifex.
- Quayson, A. (2007). *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.
- Resources - Arts Access Australia. Retrieved 25 September 2020, from <https://artsaccessaustralia.org/resources/>
- Reynolds, K. (2011). *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.



- Reynolds, K., & Grenby, M. (2011). *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rifanda, M., Nababan, M., & Djatmika, D. (2019). Translation Techniques of the Responses of Refusal Speech Act in Percy Jackson the Last Olympian. *International Journal Of Multicultural And Multireligious Understanding*, 6(6), 64-70.
- Riordan, R. (2005). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. New York, USA: Disney Hyperion.
- Riordan, R. (2006). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Sea of Monsters*. New York, USA: Disney Hyperion.
- Riordan, R. (2007). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Titan's Curse*. New York, USA: Disney Hyperion.
- Riordan, R. (2008). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Battle of the Labyrinth*. New York, USA: Disney Hyperion.
- Riordan, R. (2009). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Last Olympian*. New York, USA: Disney Hyperion.
- Rosenberg, A. (2011). Tamora Pierce on 'Twilight,' Girl Heroes, and Fantasy Birth Control. Retrieved 3 September 2020, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/tamora-pierce-on-twilight-girl-heroes-and-fantasy-birth-control/239861/>
- Rucklidge, J. (2008). Gender differences in ADHD: implications for psychosocial treatments. *Expert Review Of Neurotherapeutics*, 8(4), 643-655. doi: 10.1586/14737175.8.4.643

- Ryan, M. (2012). Possible Worlds | the living handbook of narratology. Retrieved 20 November 2019, from <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/54.html>
- Sarig, R. (2019). Under Empty Skies: The Absence of God and Parental Replacement in Israeli Children's Literature on the Jewish Holocaust. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 44(3), 271-289. doi: 10.1353/chq.2019.0033
- Saunders, K. (2004). What disability studies can do for children's literature. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v24i1.849
- Schalk, S. (2017). Critical Disability Studies as Methodology. *Lateral*, 6(1). doi: 10.25158/l6.1.13
- Schalk, S. (2016). Reevaluating the Supercrip. *Journal Of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 10(1), 71-86. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2016.5
- Senior, W. (2012). Quest Fantasies. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (pp. 190-199). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, T. (1994). Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?. *Disability & Society*, 9(3), 283-299. doi: 10.1080/09687599466780341
- Siebers, T. (2008). *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Sigalow, E., & Fox, N. (2014). Perpetuating Stereotypes: A Study of Gender, Family, and Religious Life in Jewish Children's Books. *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion*, 53(2), 416-431. doi: 10.1111/jssr.12112

- Slinning, K. (2018). *Messiasmotiver i Rick Riordans forfatterskap om Percy Jackson : Hvordan kan en lese Percy Jackson i lys av Messiasmotiver i Bibelen og kristne tekster?* (Masters). MF vitenskapelig høyskole for teologi, religion og samfunn.
- Skogli, E., Teicher, M., Andersen, P., Hovik, K., & Øie, M. (2013). ADHD in girls and boys – gender differences in co-existing symptoms and executive function measures. *BMC Psychiatry*, 13(1). doi: 10.1186/1471-244x-13-298
- Snyder, S., & Mitchell, D. (2008). "How did we get all these disabilities in here?" Disability Film Festivals and the Politics of Atypicality. *Canadian Journal Of Film Studies*, 17(1).
- Stemp, J. (2004). Devices and desires: science fiction, fantasy and disability in literature for young people. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(1). doi: 10.18061/dsq.v24i1.850
- Sullivan, R. (1999). Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives. Retrieved 31 August 2020, from <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1118/1024>
- Swain, J., & French, S. (2000). Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability. *Disability & Society*, 15(4), 569-582. doi: 10.1080/09687590050058189
- Tandberg, C. (2016). *Heltemotiv fra gresk mytologi i barne- og ungdomslitteratur : hvordan har Rick Riordan i sitt forfatterskap om Percy Jackson tatt i bruk heltemotiv fra gresk mytologi, og hvilken betydning har dette for helterollen?* (Masters). Det teologiske menighetsfakultet.
- Tangey, P. (2020). Researching issues-based children's books – a 'how to' from As Fast As I Can novelist Penny Tangey. Retrieved 22 September 2020, from <https://www.booktopia.com.au/blog/2020/04/21/researching-issues-based-childrens-books-a-how-to-from-as-fast-as-i-can-novelist-penny-tangey/>

- Thompson, A., & Obenson, T. (2020). The Academy Responds to Best Picture Inclusion Standards: 5 Questions and Answers. Retrieved 18 September 2020, from <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/09/the-academy-new-best-picture-inclusion-standards-1234585344/>
- Treat, S. (2009). How America Learned to Stop Worrying and Cynically ENJOY! The Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist. *Communication And Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 103-109. doi: 10.1080/14791420802663728
- Volger, C. (2007). *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (3rd ed.). Ann Arbor, USA: Michael Wiese Productions.
- What is ADHD main page | ADHD Australia. Retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://www.adhdaustralia.org.au/about-adhd/what-is-attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/>
- What is dyslexia? | Australian Dyslexia Association. Retrieved 28 August 2020, from <https://dyslexiaassociation.org.au/what-is-dyslexia/>
- Wheeler, E. (2019). *HandiLand: The Crippest Place on Earth*. Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Wheeler, E. (2013). No Monsters in This Fairy Tale: Wonder and the New Children's Literature. *Children's Literature Studies Quarterly*, 38(3), 335-350.
- Williams, K. (2009). Enabling Richard: The Rhetoric of Disability in Richard III. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29(4). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i4.997>
- Williams, S. (2010). Percy Jackson: My boy's own adventure. Retrieved 24 October 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/feb/08/percy-jackson-rick-riordan>

- Whittington-Walsh, F. (2002). From Freaks to Savants: Disability and hegemony from The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) to Sling Blade (1997). *Disability & Society*, 17(6), 695-707. doi: 10.1080/0968759022000010461
- Wilde, A. (2020). *Film, Comedy, and Disability: Understanding Humour and Genre in Cinematic Constructions of Impairment and Disability*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Wilson, J. (2017). The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37(2).
- Wood, D. (2011). Shakespeare and Disability Studies. *Literature Compass*, 8(5), 316-326. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00803.x
- Wood, J. (2014). Soul Cycle. Retrieved 9 January 2020, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/08/soul-cycle>
- Wälivaara, J. (2018). Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes: Ableism and Heteronormativity in Science Fiction Munch's Painting? Painting Reproductions on Display. *Culture Unbound: Journal Of Current Cultural Research*, 10(2), 226-245. doi: 10.3384/cu.2000.1525.2018102226
- Young, C. (2018). Interrogating the Lack of Diversity in Award-Winning LGBTQ-Inclusive Picturebooks. *Theory Into Practice*, 58(1), 61-70. doi: 10.1080/00405841.2018.1536915

*Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.*

# **AUDREY MUFFINSTUMP AND THE DOORS OF CLOVER**

**BY ALEXANDRA PILLING**

## CHAPTER ONE

The house is infested.

Again.

My fault, since I'm the one who keeps feeding them. Pretty sure Grandma's on to me, too, 'cause she's glaring at me in that way that says, **I know what you're up to**. I'm not sure what the big deal is. How anyone could think these tiny fairies are a nuisance?

They're maybe an inch tall, with skin that's see-through and shimmering at the same time. Their hair moves like candlelight, and I'm pretty sure they make their clothes out of pieces of my t-shirts, since they're always full of holes (which I guess is **kind of** annoying). But the best part is their wings. Lacy like a dragonfly's and speckled with all the colours of the rainbow. Way cooler than the tiny dryads in my **real** home. They're a drab, sickly-green colour, and they like to pluck my eyebrows out while I'm trying to sleep. Understandable, I guess. We did sort of steal their tree from them

"For the last time, Audrey, pay attention!"

Grandma raps her wand against the edge of the desk we're sharing like she's about to start an epic drum solo. My knees (or knee, singular, if we're being technical) knock against the underside of the table, and my notebooks and pencils go flying. The fairies gathered around the light above us swoop like tiny comets. They seize the notebooks and pen out of mid-air and flit away with them. They'll be on my pillow later. They like me.

"Oh, no," I say. "Now what will I take notes with?"

The way Grandma glares at me, you'd think I committed some horrible crime against humanity.

"You ought to take this more seriously, Audrey," she chides me. "These lessons are part of your heritage! Your history!"

I school my face into the solemn expression she wants to see and nod, but by the way she purses her lips and dips her head back to the tome she's reading from, I know it's not enough. She is right, though. I **should** enjoy these stories; they're the most fascinating ones ever told, full of magic, adventure, and daring, all the huge and epic things I can only **dream** of doing with my prosthetic leg. Since that's apparently a hindrance in the magical world where people can **surf on the air** if they want to.

When my parents would go over these things with me, you know, **before**, they made the stories funny. They acted it all out, with my mum on the piano and my dad putting on funny voices for each person. Grandma delivers the stories like a sermon, in a bland, even voice like a vacuum cleaner. It shouldn't be a surprise at this point that the fairies are the most interesting thing in the room.

Plus, there's no natural light in here. No windows, either. Not that you'd be able to see anything if there were, maybe the pale roots of the trees and plants above us burrowing deeper and deeper. Sometimes I think this might have been an intentional choice Grandma made when she moved into this house, nestled in the very centre of a mountain; if she can't see anything fun or exciting happening, why would she ever want to leave?

Well, if she's ever curious, I've got a list of over a thousand reasons why.

"But what's the point?" I yawn and stretch my arms high above my head. "We've gone over this stuff a million times, Grandma. I know it all already." I could teach all the lessons myself at this point, I've heard them that many times.

"Oh, really?" Grandma crosses her arms and settles back in her high-backed chair. Someone with so many rollers in their hair has no business looking so intimidating. "Then you won't mind doing exactly that."

I scowl at her. I'll never, ever get used to that. "I told you not to read my mind anymore, Grandma."

"Perhaps you should think a little more quietly, if you don't want to be overheard."

I gape at her — she can't be **serious** — but she just quirks an eyebrow at me and waves as if to say, **I'm waiting**.



I sigh. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Anywhere you want. It's your lesson now, after all."

I suck in a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh that ruffles the papers on the desk.

"The world is made up of two layers." I glance at Grandma; she doesn't nod or move or shake her head. "Uh, the lower, magical layer, and the earthly, non-magical layer. They exist side-by-side, kind of like twins."

"Yes," Grandma says, drawing out the word and staring at me like I stated the most obvious thing in the world. Honestly, though, I probably did.

"The magicians used to live in the lower layer," I go on. "There were huge cities where they all lived together, balancing and growing each other's magic, building their homes in strange places. But when the magicians began to die out about a thousand years ago, the lower layer began to crumble."

"Why?"

"Because the collective magic held the world up," I recite as I twirl the thin chain of my necklace and slide the small lion charm back and forth. For courage and strength, my dad said when he gave it to me, not long after I started at a real school. I needed all of it, it turned out. Real school kind of sucks. I haven't taken it off since. "Without the magic of all the magicians, it couldn't keep itself going anymore. The lower layer collapsed and only exists in small pockets now."

"So why does this house exist in the lower layer without crumbling, also?" Grandma demands.

"You can't tell me that this house is fine in the lower layer, Grandma," I retort, grinning. "The roof caves in at least once a week."

"No cheek from you, missy." Grandma wags a finger, but I know by now when she's about to start laughing, too. To be fair, the roof caving in doesn't happen **too** often, you just need to be ready for it, closed eyes and mouth and all. "What keeps this house intact?"

"Your magic. And mine. And the Muffinstump family sceptre. If Mum and Dad were here, too, the house wouldn't shrink or collapse at all. I have no idea what you were doing living here all by yourself."

But if Mum and Dad were here, and not... away, I wouldn't be staying here with Grandma at all. We'd both be happier for it.

"Likely not," Grandma says. "Now," she raps the edge of the desk with her wand again, "where were you?"

"A long while after the magicians began dying," I go on, "someone tried to restore the lower layer to what it was like before."

"And did this someone have a name?"

This someone sure does have a name, but I've never been able to say it without laughing.

"I'm waiting, Audrey."

"His name was Wallace."

"Wallace what?"

A snicker bubbles up in my throat and tumbles out before I can stop it.

"Don't make fun," Grandma warns. "Or make light. Those were terrible atrocities. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, magician and non-magician alike, were killed in Poultrygeist's quest. Entire cities were scorched and destroyed."

"You sound like you were actually there." It's not impossible; Magicians are sometimes long-lived; Grandma might have been there. "But it's such a dumb name. Wallace Poultrygeist. Might as well call him Wallace Chicken Ghost. Or Wallace Pidgeon Spectre."

The edge of a smile tickles Grandma's lips again.

"Don't make fun," she says again, but lighter this time. "Besides, with a surname like Muffinstump, we're in no place to judge. Now, keep going."

I let out another deep breath — the name is dumb, but what he did all those hundreds of years ago sure wasn't. "Wallace Duck Ghoul kidnapped the heads of the magical families and stole each family's magical item, basically the vessels of their power. No family can

break or wield another's magic, but if enough items are brought together, the combined magic is extraordinary. When Poultrygeist amassed a dozen different items, he attempted to use the combined magic along with his own to re-establish the lower layer to what it was like before. But it didn't work. He ended up destroying the last magical city left in the lower layer, and everyone still living there died."

Grandma goes quiet for a moment — she always does when we get to this part. "Correct," she says at last.

I open my mouth, but a trickle, like dry water, hits me right in the middle of my head. The whole house rumbles like it's being shaken from the outside. Grandma and I lock eyes and freeze.

"Oh, no," she says, right before everything falls apart.

The roof cracks open like a coconut, letting in an avalanche of dirt and rocks ranging from tiny pebbles to massive boulders. I leap out of my seat and press myself into a corner as Grandma yells out an incantation. The hole knits itself back together, halting the flow of dirt and ever-growing rocks.

The room is full of dusty smoke, thick enough that I can't see through it. Grandma says another spell and it all disappears, leaving behind the desk buckling under the weight of enough rocks to line a large garden and house a thriving community of spiders.

"I think that's enough for one day," Grandma says.

I spit out a mouthful of dirt. "I think so, too."

A ping sounds from the other room. The oven or the mail, I don't know. They all sound the same. Grandma hops out of the chair, dusts off her nightie, and sets off out the door, leaving the pile of dirt and rocks and random pieces of roof all over the desk and floor. I stare at it all, frowning. She's not expecting **me** to clean it all up, is she?

I stand and stumble when a loud wail sounds from the kitchen.

"Grandma?" I peek around the edge of the door. "Grandma, what's wrong?"

Silence. My stomach flips like it's botching a gymnastics routine. I creep out of the study and inch my way down the hall, to the kitchen doorway.

Grandma stands by the edge of the open oven, one hand holding a small, white note, the other latched to her mouth to keep the rest of her sounds from pouring out.

“Grandma?” I set a hand on her tense shoulder. “Is everything all right?”

“Your parents, Audrey, they’re —” Grandma stops, chokes on a gasp. “It’s a letter from your father.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“My father,” I repeat, like there’s any other way I could have heard that sentence. I wait for Grandma to laugh, shake her head, tell me it’s all a bad joke, but it never comes. “What do you mean, it’s from my father?”

It’s been over six months since Mum and Dad went missing. I almost laughed when Grandma told me, because nothing **goes missing**. Not when, if I ever lose anything, Grandma magics it back into existence like it never disappeared in the first place. Not even in the lower layers, where there’s a million paths to nowhere, a million opportunities for something to vanish. The idea of it is ridiculous. **Missing**. Nothing is ever missing.

But **they** are. And there’s nothing I can do about it except hope and hope and hope that they’ll come home.

Grandma doesn’t move. Her gaze whips back and forth over the letter like the barrel of a typewriter, her eyebrows furrowing and her mouth pursing like it’s written in a language she doesn’t understand. The note is on thick, creamy cardstock, the sort of fancy stuff reserved for wedding invitations and business cards, but the edges are scorched and black, as if they’ve touched flames. The stench of it is strong, like rotten eggs and mouldy socks.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Grandma mutters. “These words... this tone...”

I try to peek over her shoulder, but it’s a little difficult getting up on tip-toe when one of your feet is fake. You’d think she’d be a bit more accommodating. “What’s so wrong about it?”

“It’s just... it’s **nonsense**,” she exclaims. “He’s talking about Venice and Denmark, cleaning brooms, pirates, and ice cream? It’s just bizarre... no sense whatsoever...”

My heart kicks up a frantic beat. Dad always left me notes throughout our treehouse in codes, weird little cyphers that only we understood. If Dad's writing in one of these codes... maybe this note is meant for me?

"Can I have a look at the note?" I ask. "Please? I just want to check something."

Grandma hands it over without even looking at me, muttering away under her breath as I read:

**give gran my love. it's been a long trip to venice on a cleaning  
broom. not as long as denmark, but nearly. i've met real strange  
peoples here; eleven ghosts are great. sea reeds are a delicacy  
which pigeons like. i don't, though. red berries marinated in tarragon  
are edible, too. big girls get no ice cream if i remember too late.**

It's Dad's handwriting, that's for sure. The same, familiar thick, dark strokes ending in sharp, thin flicks, the g's with the same fun, curly tail that I've never been able to do myself without his hands to guide me.

But the strangest part? It's just nonsense enough to make sense.

**Eleven of them are great.**

I read the note one more time, taking care to note every eleventh letter. Grandma watches me like a hawk, but I keep my head down, and my mind blank. **No Grandma, I'm not making a breakthrough of any kind.**

**give gran my Love. it's been A long trip to Venice on a clEaning  
broom. Not as long as Denmark, but nEarly. i've met Real strange  
Peoples here; Eleven ghosts Are great. sea Reeds are a deLicacy  
which Pigeons like. I don't, though. Red berries mArinated in**

**Tarragon are Edible, too. biG girls get no Ice cream if i Remember  
too Late.**

L A V E N D E R P E A R L P I R A T E G I R L

**Lavender Pearl; Pirate Girl.**

My favourite book from when I was little, with the pirate girl, Lavender, who went on daring adventures across the sea, with her peg-leg and all.

It's not much of a clue. I haven't read that book in years, and I don't even have a copy of it. Why would Dad mention a book I haven't seen or read since I was five?

"Does it mean anything to you?" Grandma asks.

It does, kind of, but I've got no idea what. Grandma stares right through me, and I feel that little tickle deep in my brain that tells me she's trying to sneak a peek. I press my mouth into a thin line and play scene after scene of my favourite movies in my head until Grandma purses her lips, looks away, and the tickle stops.

"I'm not sure." It's not **technically** a lie. I bite my lip and set the card down on the table. "But this is good, though, right? That he's written? At least we know that they're all right. That they're alive."

Grandma looks like she might cry. "I'm not sure what it means, Audrey. I just... I'm going to make a few calls." She drags her hand through her silver hair, messing up the curlers. "You should probably..." But she's down the hall and out of earshot before I can finish my sentence.

And that's a good thing, because the room is spinning like a broken carousel. I tug out the closest chair and collapse into it. My hands ball into tight fists which sit and vibrate with nerves atop my knees.

They're alive. **Alive**. It's weird. I hadn't really thought of them as dead before. At least, not on purpose, not for anything longer than a second. But the idea must have always been

at the back of my mind, because the relief of knowing they must be all right makes me want to cry.

**They're alive.**

Hours pass by with Grandma holed up in the living room, making muffled calls through the special channel on the television. It's hard to tell how much time has passed since the letter arrived. There's not much else I can do but fix myself a plate of last night's leftover spaghetti for dinner and ponder in peace.

The book is a strange clue. Does Dad mean that he wants me to find a copy of the book? Remember a certain passage? I already know it all back to front, but there's not a passage that stands out as a clue. All the book was about was Lavender Pearl sailing the seas with a parrot named Salty; it wasn't a high-stakes thriller or anything like that.

The conversation in the living room takes a turn. Grandma lets loose a wail like a banshee that has the hairs on my arm standing on end. I shove away my half-eaten spaghetti and try to creep (it's a hard ask with a fake leg...) up on the narrow gap between the door and its jamb.

"There must be something you can do!"

A voice I don't recognise replies in a voice like he's talking to a five-year-old, "I understand your concerns, Eudora, but there's nothing suggesting anything sinister —"

"— How is this letter not enough to suggest something awful is happening? Or the near constant earthquakes ripping holes in my house?" Grandma screeches like a barn owl. "That's my son and his wife out there! And the sceptre! What of Pandora and Aurelian? Tabitha, too? They aren't answering their calls, either. What if they've been taken as well? You know what it was like last time this happened, Magnus!"

I frown. Who's Magnus?

"Don't you dare talk to me about what happened last time," Magnus says in a low voice that gives me goose-bumps. "Perhaps your memory isn't what it used to be after all this time, but I was there, too, Eudora. When we have evidence more concrete than the nonsense in that letter, we'll get started."



The voices stop, replaced with grey static and Grandma's weary sigh. My arms vibrate along my sides. Where does this guy get off, talking about my family like that? And what more evidence does he want? And why does he get to decide when my parents should be found, anyway?

But... maybe my parents don't want **Magnus** to find them. Not if they sent a letter here, coded specifically for me. Am I the one they want to find them?

Silent as I can (again, not easy) I slip away from the open door and scurry back to the dining table, but at the end of the hallway, there's a jewel-blue glow outlining the end door. Not a door, but **A Door**. Marked with the symbol of our magic, a golden clover, in the topmost righthand corner. A Door is like most other doors you walk through, but most doors can't take you anywhere in the world.

And for once, the Door is **open**.

Where did she go? And when? How much time did I lose standing there like a hatstand before she left?

If the Door's still ajar, it'll be calibrated to the last location Grandma went to. I'm not old enough for the Door to recognise my magic, so I couldn't pick a new location even if I wanted to, but maybe Grandma's got a few hints tucked up under those rollers that she isn't sharing.

Would she notice if I slipped through it? Went and found Mum and Dad on my own? It's not like I've been living with her for long, and I don't think she's liked having me here all that much anyway. She's distracted enough that I don't think she'd notice I'm gone until she tries to send me to bed. Besides, if Grandma's right, and there really is something awful happening, I don't have time to wait.

But how would I do it? I wouldn't be able to do it alone, for thousands of reasons. My best bet would be to make my way to one of my cousins. Tabitha, probably. She just turned sixteen and got a new wand of her own.

Plus, she owes me. **Big**.

Trouble is, Tabitha — and Aunt Pandora and Uncle Aurelian — live on the other side of the world, their home balanced on the craggy tip of the Matterhorn in Switzerland. By myself, and without the money or the proper equipment — and that's all without considering how my leg might hold up — it's not going to be easy for me to get there.

But... no one else is trying, are they? So... why not me?

I skid down the hall and hang a right into my room, slamming the door shut.

I don't have much time. I rip open my drawers and wardrobes, cabinets and desk, grabbing anything that might be useful and shove it in the backpack Mum charmed to be bottomless and weightless when I was little. Since, it's proven quite handy. Half my wardrobe goes in, plus all my bathroom stuff, and my purse full of foreign coins.

Travelling anywhere with a prosthetic presents its own set of problems. Wet wipes aren't as good for cleaning my little nub of thigh as warm, soapy water, but they're better than nothing. I'll need spare socks, too, and the special cream and powder, and while I know I'm going to be out and looking for... whatever it is I'm meant to be looking for, it's not like I'm never going to see a bathtub.

I hope, anyway.

My door doesn't creak as much if I shove it open in one big push, but it's still not silent. I scrunch my eyes shut and wait for Grandma and her cavalry of scowls and hair rollers, but nothing happens. She's still gone.

I swallow and keep going.

The hallway is still lit blue from the cracked-open Door, just enough to light my way. I tiptoe closer, and closer, and closer. Grandma's not so careless as to leave it open accidentally; does she **want** me to follow her?

My heart hammers in my chest and I swear it echoes all around me.

I open the Door and all the way. The air inside it swirls like a storm, violent and churning enough to give me a stomach-ache just looking at it. I pull in a deep breath once, twice, and leap into the icy, swirling air.

## CHAPTER THREE

I wake up face down in the middle of a wide, sprawling, unfamiliar meadow full of clovers with purple and white flowers. I can't see a whole lot of it. The sunlight seems brighter than normal, and my eyes are stinging and watering, turning the field into a blurry Monet.

Pretty, but certainly not Aunt Pandora and Uncle Aurelian's house.

I want to panic, but it's my first taste of fresh air in **months**. Inner-mountain air tastes like mould and mushrooms and is always kind of warm. This air is sharp on my tongue, like ice-cold water, sweet and delicious. How could I have forgotten how wonderful fresh air and sunshine is?

To my left, there's nothing but the same field of clover flowers, extending so far away I can't see an edge. To my right, a silhouette of a city looms.

A city is good, a landmark I can work with. At least, it would be if I know **what** city it is, or where I am. There's no one around to ask. But if it's the last landmark Grandma visited, then it must be at least kind of okay for me to be here, too.

In hindsight, jumping through the Door without a solid plan wasn't the best idea I've ever had.

"Think harder, Audrey," I whisper to myself. There must be some way to go about this that I haven't considered yet. The city should have a Door somewhere that I can use. It would have to, wouldn't it? If it's somewhere Grandma visits often, she'd need a way to get back.

It seems as good a plan as any, so I set off for the city.

And the earth starts to shake.

I tumble face-down to the ground again. My nose and lips mash into the warm dirt. I scrunch my eyes shut while everything rattles around me with a sound I've never heard before, like the whole world is roaring.

It comes to a shuddering halt seconds later, and somehow the silence is louder than the roaring, and stillness more jarring than the rattling.

I crack one eye open. The flowers sway in a gentle breeze, but there's no gaping chasms in the ground, no toppled trees. No distant screams or echoes of what happened. Nothing that would hint at a natural disaster.

Except...

A dark haze hangs over the city like a drawn curtain, but there's a gap in the skyline between two buildings and a tall plume of smoke the colour of storm clouds rising from it.

Something icy seizes my heart; was Grandma in there?

I go to run, but something between my prosthetic and the sock on my nub is rubbing the skin raw. I growl a little to myself and sit again to remove my leg, and the sock, and dust away all the sand and stones that made their way through the gap.

I reattach it with a sigh and stand. The city doesn't look that far away; I could walk the distance if I need to. And I do need to, even if the city is in shambles.

Especially if the cause of the shambles feels so... weird.

**XXX**

The haze is right in front of me.

It divides the meadow from the city in a dead-straight line that stretches far in either direction. It's **thick**, like molasses. There's a thrum of magic inside it, stronger than any other magic I've felt, even from Grandma and the rest of our family combined. And there's an oldness, too. I don't know how else to describe it other than... ancient.

I step through, but there's a sinking feeling in my stomach telling me I should turn back and look for something else.

The clover flowers from the meadow still grow here, all through the cracks of what used be the roads and footpaths. Some grow from the windows of the buildings, reaching towards the high, faintly violet sun. Some grow from old building gutters and spill over the edges like mistletoe. It's like some awful, apocalyptic future where humans have all died out, but nature lives on. And that's still not even the strangest part.

There's nothing. No people talking. No engines revving. No horns honking. Not even a bird tweeting.

In the shadow of the buildings, the flower-covered path is soft and unsteady. My feet sink into the soggy earth, and when I pull them back out, they make nasty, wet, squelching sounds.

The buildings here are taller than any in the earthly layer. I have no idea how they didn't **all** fall in the earthquake. Some are shells, frames and crumbled walls and not much else. Chipped and broken glass sticks out of the windows, ready to fall at a moment's notice.

I shift into the middle of the road, just in case.

The closer I get to the collapsed building, the stronger the tingly sensation of magic grows. And there's sound now, too. Not typical city noises, but a low, slow rumble like a distant echo. I shiver and rub the chill off my arms.

A line of smaller buildings leading up to the main one toppled over, too, like someone's tossed a massive bowling ball through the streets. I don't think it happened at the same time, though; there's no dust settling around them, and even though it's wrecked, there's still something a little too neat about it all, staged somehow. It gives me too clear a line of sight to the massive wreckage ahead.

The wrecked building is down, but the smashed heap of it is as tall as any other still standing. As I get closer, the bigger it gets, until it fills up everything in my line of sight.

And right there at the very top, so high up I wonder if maybe I'm imagining it, there's something — **someone** — up there, moving.

Waving.

Beckoning.

I squint: Grandma?

Another rush of magic, more powerful than anything I've ever felt before, washes over me like a tidal wave. It leaves me breathless and thrumming, like my body isn't enough to contain **me** anymore.

The sensation of magic seems to grow out from the figure...

I stare up at the figure, close in on the rubble, and —

I'm falling through the world again.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I land on my backside somewhere dark, cold, and crunchy. No, crunchy isn't right...

It's snow. Densely packed, kind of sharp, hard as the ground itself. And cold. So, so cold.

Wherever I am, I'm not in the empty city anymore, that's for sure.

Did I find a clover mark? On the road, beneath the flowers? Over an old, rusted drain cover that broke when I walked over it? It's ridiculous, but so is every other magical rule. And even if I'm wrong, I can't even begin to guess what the right answer might be.

If, maybe, that figure on top of the hill of rubble did something to me...

But metres away — how or why, I have no idea — is Tabitha's house. Same as when I last visited with my parents over a year ago, with thick log walls, windows covered by green curtains, and a constant, billowing plume of smoke rising from the chimney. No, I've got no idea how I got here, and about a thousand questions I'd like to ask on the subject, but right now? I don't think I could be more grateful.

The place is so cold it bites right through my thin coat — maybe I should have brought the thick, fluffy one Mum brought me back from her trip to Iceland last year. There's a soft, underlying thrum to the place, too, telling me I made it to another, less powerful pocket of the lower layer. A small group of mountain climbers show up as shadowy after-images, tucked into a small crevice near the mountain's top, never seeing me or the house that they'll walk clean through in just a second.

Beyond them, a yeti. It watches me for a moment before it lumbers away.

It's not even ten metres away from where I started, but between the pain and the cold, the wind and the dark, it's like I've run a marathon three times over by the time I reach the front door.

I'm pretty sure my hands have frozen permanently into fists, and I wonder if they might shatter when I knock. I'm jittering from side to side, teeth chattering like a wide-up toy, when the door pulls open, letting out a wonderful gust of warm, spicy-smelling air.

Tabitha stands on the threshold, dressed in full snow gear, her jet-black hair covered by a bright pink knit hat, her mouth hanging open like a stunned fish.

"Audrey?" Tabitha looks me up and down, a deep frown sinking into her cheeks. "How did you get here?"

I shiver some more. This sort of cold is like nothing I've ever felt before. "I walked."

Tabitha raises a brow and fixes me with the most dour, disbelieving expression I've ever seen. "You walked."

I try to smile through my chattering teeth. "Yep."

"All the way up the mountain?" She glances down at my leg for a split second.

"No, not all of the way. I..." I can't explain to myself how I ended up here, or what I saw in the city. I have no idea how I would explain it to someone else. "I used the Doors."

"You used the Doors? You're, what, nine? Ten?"

"I'm twelve." I scowl, resist the growing urge to kick Tabitha in the shin.

Tabitha stares, but I hold my ground.

"All right, then," Tabitha takes a step back and sweeps out her arm, "you'd better come in, I guess."

"You guess? Gee, thanks." Inside, the house is warm and cosy, with a huge fire roaring in the corner and cross-stitched cushions resting on the sofa. I scramble to the hearth and thaw out my hands in front of the flames.

Tabitha sits on one of the massive lounges and watches me, frowning.

"So, little cousin," she says, flicking invisible lint off her sleeve. "What brings you up my mountain?"

"Mum and Dad are missing."

"Well, they aren't here, if that's what you're wondering."

I roll my eyes. "I know **that**. Dad sent me a letter. I think he's in a volcano somewhere."



Tabitha sighs and it puffs in the air, even though there's a warm, roaring fire in the corner. "A volcano, huh? Lucky."

I shake my head. "Not in a good way, Tabitha."

"It's better than here, at least." Tabitha sighs again and sits up a little in her seat. "My parents are missing, too. About four months now." She frowns. "It's been annoying. The house keeps sliding down the mountain, and I'm not too great at putting it back up again."

"The house **does** feel like it's on a weird angle."

Tabitha glares at me. "I'm doing the best I can, all things considered."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Has she really been living alone, atop a cold, miserable mountain for the past four months? And what has she been doing that whole time?

"Between my mum and dad and yours, Grandma's so worried."

Tabitha looks at me like I'm the crazy one. "What? I figured they'd come back. They've only gone to a conference, and they've disappeared for longer than this before, you know. I bet your parents have, too, once or twice."

"Well, I think that if my parents are missing, and yours are, too then they're probably together."

"Sound logic, since they're part of the same family with the same sorts of interests." Tabitha lolls her head back against her chair. "It is weird," she concedes. "But I still don't know what you want me to do about it."

"I want you to come and help me find them."

Tabitha stares for a long moment before she shakes her head and says, "Yeah, no. That's not going to happen."

I furrow my brows. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Tabitha barks out a humourless laugh. "Because I've got no idea what I'm doing, that's why."

"Well, then I guess I'll just have to steal your wand."

"You could try, little cousin. You could try." She sighs again and tips her beanie-covered head back against the top of the sofa. "Maybe you should sit this one out, Audrey,

let the grown-ups handle it. I'm sure they already are. There's no need for us to get involved, too."

"But they aren't!" I tell her. "If they were, our parents would be back by now."

Tabitha sighs. Again. "Audrey —"

"— No! You don't get it! He asked me to find them! *Me!* Not anyone else. And I'm going to do it, I'm going to find them, but I can't do it alone. I need your help, Tabby. Besides, what else would you do up here anyway?" I ask. "Keep the fire going and prop the house back up when it falls again? Sounds kind of boring, don't you think?"

Tabitha sighs and takes her wand from her pocket again, twirls it between her fingers in wide, neat loops.

"Besides," I go on, slyly. "You owe me."

"I owe you?" Tabitha frowns. "What for?"

"Grandma's birthday party four years ago?"

Tabitha pales. "You remember that?"

"Yep." I make a show of inspecting my fingernails. "It'd be a shame if someone told Grandma how that fancy vase broke, wouldn't it?"

"You wouldn't."

"It'd be a shame," I go on again, louder, "if someone told Grandma the reason her vase broke was because you nicked the family sceptre and started waving it around."

"You're kind of mean, you know that?"

"Not mean. Just... persuasive."

"No. I'm pretty sure you're just mean." She stows her wand away up her sleeve. "Are you sure you want to do this? It's not going to be easy."

"Of course, I'm sure," I say with a firm nod. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Uh, because of your..." She waves a hand in the vague direction of my prosthetic.

"Your... you know."

"My leg?" I glance between it and Tabitha with a bemused smile. "You don't need to talk about it like that, you know. I know it's there. Or, not there."

Tabitha runs her hand through her hair, knocking off her beanie and making her hair stand like it's charged with static. "Won't it make things harder? Slow you down?"

"I don't see how it would. It's been this way since I was born; I'm used to it by now."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Because I won't have any idea what to do if something happens to it."

"Good thing I do, then."

Tabitha heaves a huge groan, and I can tell I'm right on the edge of victory.

"Fine," she says like it's all some great hardship, but I'm certain there's a glint of excitement in Tabitha's eyes. "All right. You win. Let's go."

XXX

The town, Zermatt, looks like it should be on a Christmas card, covered in snow and sparkling in the cool, white light. It's speckled with people in thick jackets and woollen scarves, ski equipment propped up on their shoulders, with so much noise and chatter and no one language standing out over another.

"So, little cousin," Tabitha starts, "do you have any idea where we're going?"

"I know exactly where we're going. We're going to England."

"England?" Tabitha frowns. "You're going to have to give me more than that, little cousin."

"There's a library," I tell her. "Dad took me there after some of my hospital appointments when I was little, and we read a book together called **Lavender Pearl, Pirate Girl**."

Tabitha hums. "Sounds cute."

"The book was the message in the letter. He wants me to go back to the Barbican library and find it."

"Do we **have** to go to England, though?" Tabitha says. "I mean, don't you have your own copy of the book, if you loved it so much?"

I shake my head. "We could never find it when we got back home. I asked once if Dad could magic me a copy, but he always said magic shouldn't be used for small things, or for our own gain."

"My dad used to say the same thing," Tabitha murmurs, glancing at the powder soft ground. She sighs and says, "We're gonna have to look around a bit for the Door."

"Why couldn't we go through the Door in your house?"

Tabitha shoots me a withering look. "Because it's locked."

"Locked?"

"Snazzy little feature built into it. The key magic holders of my house are missing; therefore, my house is on lockdown. No one in or out via magical means. I'm lucky I've got enough power to get us to the bottom of the mountain in one piece."

That... makes no sense. "What have you been eating all this time?"

"Mum and Dad hoard canned goods. I kind of think maybe they knew something was going to happen. I'm surprisingly well-stocked."

"But you don't know where the Door down here is?" I ask. "You **live** here!"

Tabitha stares down at me like I'm a bit dim. "No, I live in my house," she says. "Do you wander about the forest floors of where you live out in the middle of nowhere? No! And why would you? I travel through the Door in my house, with my parents, when they're both around to bring me anywhere, and I don't stop for jaunts down here." She buries her gloved hands in the deepest recesses of her thick coat's pockets and huffs out a steaming breath. "Come on, little cousin; it's freezing out here."

Tabitha powerwalks up the street, her neck twisting here and there. I dash along after her, but I've never managed great speeds on my prosthetic, and the icy sidewalk is practically a death trap.

I follow her to the very edge of the street and down a narrow alley between two shops, where she comes to an abrupt halt in the middle. On the left side is a large Door, made of

metal with a tiny window halfway up. In its topmost right corner, is a tiny golden clover, worn and tarnished, but still thrumming with magical energy.

Tabitha pulls her wand from her pocket. Hers is made of a light, ashy sort of wood, patterned with a spiral like a unicorn's horn.

"Are you thinking hard of London?" Tabitha asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut and picture all the major English landmarks I can think of. "I'm trying."

"You should probably try harder," Tabitha whispers as she grasps the handle, twists it the wrong way, and pushes the Door open. The portal inside glows a bright, electric blue.

Footsteps thump up the alley behind us like a frantic heartbeat.

"Wait!"

Tabitha slams the Door shut and shoves her wand up her sleeve. The gap between the Door and the ground still glows, bright enough to catch the attention of anyone walking around.

"Excuse me?" the voice says again.

Tabitha grabs my shoulder and squeezes. "Play it cool, Audrey," she mutters. "Act naturally."

I scowl. "I think this is the opposite of acting naturally."

"Excuse me?" they say again. "This necklace? I think it belongs to you."

I wrench myself out of Tabitha's grip and face the stranger. He's an odd-looking boy, not much older than me. Tall, lanky and skinny, with eyes the same colour as milk chocolate and a shock of messy black hair poking out from behind the ski mask propped up on his head. His cheeks are flushed, and he's puffing like he ran the whole way behind us. He's holding one hand out towards me with an earnest expression on his face; the other is wrapped in a cast, like it's been broken.

"Is this yours?" he asks me. "I'm pretty sure you dropped it back there."

"We didn't drop anything," Tabitha bursts out. I almost laugh. **Play it cool.** Yeah, right.

“Wait!” The boy’s jaw drops as he points a shaky finger at the strip of light at the bottom of the door. “What is **that**?”

“It’s nothing.” Tabitha presses her back against the Door, but it’s not helping the boy be any less suspicious. “Go away, all right?”

His eyes narrow. “Why? What are you two hiding?” He lowers his voice to a hiss, “Are you doing something... illegal?”

“Go away, kid, it’s **nothing**.”

The boy scoffs and shakes his head. “Yeah, right. **Nothing**. If it really is nothing, I guess you won’t mind if I look?”

He’s skinny, but he’s strong, too. He barges right past Tabitha and brushes me aside with ease. After that, everything happens too fast for me to react. The boy tugs the Door open and stares into the wall of bright, blue light.

“Wow,” he breathes.

“No, no, no!” Tabitha yells. She runs after him but doesn’t slow in time. She sends the boy careening into me, and both of us fly through the open Door.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I land on a padded heap in the middle of a bright green garden sitting like an oasis in the middle of a dull, grey street. It's twilight out, and the streets are filled with people leaving work for home. On a nearby rooftop, an English flag flutters in the gentle breeze.

The mound beneath me groans; I hold myself deadly still. The mound groans again, wriggles like a turtle on their back. I blink and turn my head...

"Gerroff me," a familiar voice says, muffled and stuffed like he's got a mouthful of cotton. My cheeks feel like they're on fire as I scramble off him without a word. He groans again and blinks up at me. "What just happened?"

I gape at him. What **did** happen?

"I... uh..."

With a sound like crackling static, Tabitha leaps to her feet. A vein near her eye twitches so forcefully it looks like it might explode. She stares at us and shakes her head, paces a short, fierce line, back and forth, stomping so hard she might wear a trench right through the concrete.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," Tabitha mutters. "This is bad. This is very, very bad."

"Tabitha," I croak. "What happened?"

"A regular human came through the Doors!" she hisses. "Do you have any idea how much trouble we could get into?" She tugs at her ponytail, frowns a thousand lines into her forehead. "So much trouble," she says again.

Tabitha nudges the boy's side with the toe of her boot. "What were you thinking, following us like that?"

The boy frowns and shoots back to his feet, dusting off his legs with his good arm. "I was thinking you might want your necklace back?"

I reach around my neck. My necklace with the lion charm is gone.

And it's sitting in the boy's outstretched hand.

I take it from him and clip it back into place. "Thank you. I... I hadn't noticed."

He shrugs again. "You're welcome." He turns in a slow circle and lets out a low whistle.

"Where are we?"

"England," Tabitha deadpans.

The boy chuckles. "Yeah, right. Where are we?"

"England."

Another awkward chuckle. "No, really. Where are we?"

"We're in England," I whisper. "Sorry."

"You know," the boy says, frowning. "That's not funny. We were just in Switzerland.

Zermatt, right? The Matterhorn? I was on a ski holiday! How could we be in England?"

"Magic," Tabitha says with a scowl. "We're in England now, kid. Deal with it."

She grabs my arm and pulls me close.

"Do not breathe a word to him about what we're doing," she hisses in my ear. "Nothing at all. Understand?"

"Why not?"

"Just don't, okay? We're in enough trouble as it is. Promise me."

"All right." I clear my throat. "Okay. I promise."

Tabitha doesn't look convinced — I don't know what I've done to make her think I'm not trustworthy — but she stalks off, leaving me with the strange boy.

"She did say magic, right?" the boy asks.

"Yeah, she's full of jokes." I scowl at Tabitha's back. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Jack," the boy says. "Jack Bean. Who are you?"

"Audrey. Audrey Muffinstump, and I —"

"— Muffinstump?" Jack repeats, a grin tugging at his lips. "That's a weird name."

"No worse than Bean," I shoot back.

"You know there's actual shops for muffin tops? The stump's sad and weird."



“And beans are gross,” I snap. “All of them. Broad beans, runner beans, butter beans and green beans and —”

“Enough!” Tabitha stomps back, rubbing at her eyes. But when I glance back at Jack, he’s still smiling at me, like we’ve just shared a joke. I’m not sure that’s ever happened to me before. “Jeez, for two kids who have never met before, you’re both doing a great job **getting on my nerves.**”

I can’t help but giggle; Jack joins in. “Sorry,” I say.

“Whatever.” Tabitha shakes her head. “Never asked to babysit two little brats with authority issues.”

“You’re not babysitting anyone. You’re as much a tagalong as he is.” I glance at Jack, who’s staring all around us like we’ve taken him to the world’s best theme park. “What are we going to do with him?”

“You could let me come with you?” Jack says, grinning.

Tabitha gives him a withering look. “That’s not an option.”

“We could take him back?” I suggest.

“He knows about us.” Tabitha sighs. “That’s not an option, either. He could blab to everyone and out us all.”

“Hey! I thought you said you weren’t doing anything illegal.”

I ignore him. “What, so we leave him here?”

“I never said this was a simple situation, Audrey.” Tabitha groans and scratches at her neck. “It’s going to be my wand for this, no matter what we do.”

“Your wand?” Jack says, his eyes wide, bright, and sparkling. “You mean... you’re not joking, right? That means you’re magic? Witches?”

“We prefer magicians, actually.” Tabitha gives him a smile far too wide to be real and looks away.

“Magicians? Seriously?”

I glare at Tabitha, but it doesn’t seem to work. “It’s meant to be a secret. We can’t go around telling everyone.”

"That is **so cool!**" His smile spreads as bright and wide as a star. I almost smile back; I don't think I've ever been so excited about magic. "Can you do something right now? Like, can you appear and disappear? Make stuff appear out of thin air?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't work like that."

"Oh." He deflates like a balloon, his smile disappearing, too. He looks between me and Tabitha and asks, "Then what do you use it for?"

"Going to new places and bringing nosy, uninvited little brats along for the ride," Tabitha snaps. "So, Audrey. The Barbican Centre. Is this the right place?"

I nod. "This is definitely it. We should head into the library before it all closes."

"Great. Let's go." Without waiting for an answer, Tabitha stalks away.

As soon as Tabitha's out of earshot, Jack nudges me with his elbow "Hey. Is your friend okay?"

I sigh and push my hair out of my eyes. "She's my cousin. And it's been... a weird day."

Jack laughs. "Tell me about it. Magic's real! That's crazy!"

"It's not **that** crazy," I say as we follow Tabitha's path. "Just because you never saw it before, doesn't mean it never existed."

"Yeah, but if magic's real, imagine what else could be out there! Ghosts, dragons, vampires, even unicorns!"

"Well, I have never seen a unicorn in my life." I trail off without another word and skip away to catch up with Tabitha.

I'll tell him later that none of it is real.

Or, some of it isn't real, anyway.

"Oof!"

I walk right into Tabitha's back and almost knock both of us over. She stands tense and stock-still at the very edge of the road, like she's been frozen there. Her jaw clenches so hard I can see the little muscles twitch. Her hands are balled into tight fists at her sides, white-knuckled and trembling like she's about to start throwing punches.

"Tabby?" I take her wrist and give it a gentle squeeze. Her pulse is jittery. "Are you all right?"

Tabitha swallows. Her gaze darts around like she's not sure what to focus on next. "Yeah, I'm... it's just huge, isn't it? So many people..."

She's not wrong. The street is full of a thousand different noises overlapping on top of the other: people talking, cars driving, phones ringing, planes flying, trams rattling. Sure, it is loud enough that I need to raise my voice a little, but isn't that to be expected? London's a big city.

But I guess Tabitha isn't used to this sort of rush? If I lived all my life on top of a quiet, isolated mountain with no reason to leave it, I don't think I'd like it, either.

I watch Tabitha carefully. "Are you sure all right?"

"I'm... okay." Her whole body seems to shrink, like everything propping her up has been drained out. "Don't worry about it, okay?" She gives me half a smile. "Can we go in now?"

"Yeah, come on." I take Tabitha's limp, clammy hand in mine. "It'll be quieter in there."

Tabitha sighs so softly I don't think I was meant to hear it. "Yeah. Okay. That sounds good."

The main entrance of the Barbican Centre is a massive, bright space with dozens of staircases leading off to all the different rooms and theatres.

Tabitha sprints to the elevator on the far wall and mashes the buttons like that'll make it appear faster. Jack and I exchange a look as he asks in a low whisper, "Is she all right? I don't think she even blinked that whole time."

"I hope so," I tell him, since I don't have a real answer. "Come on, the library is on the next level."

The elevator doors part and Tabitha barrels inside.

"Tabitha?" I begin once the doors are closed. Jack leans against the wall opposite us, staring at a poster for a photography event. "Uh... when we were on the sidewalk..."

Tabitha shakes her head but won't glance back. "It's nothing. I'm not very good in new places. And it's so busy out there... it freaked me out a little, that's all."

"But you're okay now, though. Right?"

"Yeah. I'm okay now." The elevator dings, and the doors part. "Come on. Let's go find your book."

We follow the signs to the children's library. It's almost the same as I remembered, with the same low ceilings and bright-coloured shelves. There are four kids sitting in a neat circle in the middle of a mat made of fluffy pom-poms. A single librarian ducks between them, looking over shoulders and helping with words.

But... something about the space feels **powerful**. There's no odd haze, so it's not like we've fallen between the layers again, but there is a tingle to the air that settles all the way into my bones and makes me think that maybe...

Maybe there's a little something more to this place than I first thought.

I glance at Tabitha, and she's glaring at me with her eyebrow arched like I've hidden something from her. I guess she feels it, too. Jack frowns and peels off his bulky ski jacket, careful of the cast around his forearm.

I shake my head and wander through the shelves, running my hands along the books' spines, until we reach a section made of low shelves caked with dust, like they haven't been cleaned in a while.

"Is this it?" Tabitha tugs a small, worn book from the shelves and dusts off the spine. It doesn't look like it's even seen daylight in years. "**Lavender Pearl: Pirate Girl**, right?"

The illustration on the front cover is so familiar that it hits me like a punch to the gut. I can almost hear all the silly voices Dad gave the characters when he read it to me. "Yeah, that's it."

There must be a clue in here of some sort: a dog-eared edge, invisible text, some sort of weird spell I can't see, but sure can feel now that the book is in my hands. I flick through the pages and find nothing.

"Get your wand," I whisper to Tabitha. "Check if there's any invisible messages or anything in the book."

"What? I can't do that! We're in **public**!" Tabitha hisses, eyes wide like I've suggested that we strip off and dance in the street.

"Jack's already seen. And we're alone anyway," I say, glancing left and right, up and down, to make sure. The few other kids around are absorbed in their own things. "Please. We need to make sure."

Tabitha sighs. "All right, fine. But I'm blaming you for this when we get questioned later."

She slips her wand from the pocket inside her coat and runs it over the cover until the book glows a warm, pleasant yellow. Jack watches with wide, unblinking eyes, an awed grin tugging at his mouth.

"Nothing," Tabitha announces, putting her wand away. "No spells, no hidden messages. Satisfied?"

"But you feel it, too, don't you?"

"It's in the air, Audrey," she says, shaking her head. "It's not in the book."

But that can't be right, can it? I can feel the magic practically vibrating off the pages, but Tabitha can't? I flick through the pages again. And again, and again and again. But there is nothing. This **can't** be the end of the story, can it? Dad wouldn't send me a note just to lead me on a cross-country mission down memory lane.

But it's hard to argue with nothing except a **feeling**.

I fling the book away like a frisbee, and in a place so quiet, it sounds like an explosion. It flutters to the ground at the top of the aisle, near the reading area, bent in half like a tent. Tears burn behind my eyes as I slide down the edge of the case to the floor.

Pointless. This whole thing has been absolutely **pointless**.

Tabitha hums. Her footsteps echo away from me and up to the top of the aisle.

"Hey, Audrey," she says, "what's this?"

An old loan card peeks out the back, stamped with dates and marked with signatures, tucked within a little envelope on the very back page. I pluck it out, but the card isn't the only thing that falls out.

Behind the old loan card is a note written on tissue paper. The corners are yellowed, like the note has been there for a while, and the folded edges are crisp and sharp and dry. Somehow, though, I get the feeling that even if I tried, the page wouldn't tear at all.

It's so full of power that it seems to leak out with each fold I undo.

"That would be why the book didn't give up any secrets," Tabitha says with a tiny smile. "It wasn't the book at all."

Dad's handwriting stares back at me. The same thick, dark strokes ending in sharp, thin flicks, and g's with the same fun, curly tail I've never been able to do myself without his hand to guide me.

And it's addressed to me.

But that makes no sense at all; the note is old. Super old. Older than me, maybe even older than Tabitha. When did my parents leave it here? When did they write it? My head spins with a thousand more questions I'm not sure I want the answers to.

Dearest Audrey,

If you're reading this, then it has happened again, and your mother and I, countless others, the sacred Muffinstump sceptre, have been taken.

Your mother and I, and the other remaining families, knew this was a possibility. Men who have wrought the sort of havoc we've seen in our histories aren't likely to stop, no matter what roadblocks are thrown in their path. History has taught us many things, Audrey, but not enough, it seems, to know when not to repeat it.

If you're sure about this quest — and I'd imagine it's no easy ask —  
then your next stop is to find Sir Arthur Codswallop, last known location,  
Melbourne, Australia. He should be able to fill in the gaps and narrow down  
your search.

I don't know how many other families have reached out to their loved  
ones, but hopefully you won't be alone. It's a tall ask, we understand, but we  
also know we've raised a magnificent daughter, more than capable of  
handling herself.

Your mother and I love you so much, Audrey, more than there are stars  
in the sky.

Until we meet again,  
Dad and Mum

Warm tears track down my cheeks, and I bat them away before they can land on the  
paper. I fold it back into its tiny square and slip it into my pocket.

"Well?" Tabitha asks. "Did it tell you anything?"

"Kind of. We have to go to Melbourne."

"Melbourne?" Tabitha repeats, her eyes wide. "As in, Melbourne, Australia? Have you  
ever been there?"

"No. Sydney once, but not Melbourne." I hold out the letter for Tabitha to read.

"What do you think he means?" she asks when she's done. "That part about history  
repeating?"

"I don't know." I bite down on my lip. "Sounds kind of ominous, but I guess we should  
go and find this Sir Arthur Codswallop and find out. Have you ever heard of him?"

Tabitha hesitates before nodding. "Once. I remember my dad talking about him, but it wasn't... good."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad says he's dotty as all get-out, but smart. Too smart for his own good... but he also thought Sir Arthur was one of the people responsible for helping Poultrygeist destroy the main city. But if your dad's telling us to find him... maybe he's all right? I mean, it wouldn't be the first time our history got twisted."

"Well, it's not like we have a better plan." I pocket the letter and pat it once to make sure it's secure and slide the book back into place on its shelf.



## CHAPTER SIX

We retrace our steps back onto the street. The twilight of the sky has turned into a deep, inky black, speckled with stars and a bright sliver of moon. I stop and stare at them; it's been six long months since I last saw a real night sky.

The street is as busy as it was before. The sidewalk is packed with couples walking arm-in-arm and groups spanning the entire width. Cars thrum along the roads and bikes dart and weave in between. I take Tabitha's hand; it's just as clammy as it was time.

We round the next corner onto a tiny alley spanning two tall buildings. Right in the middle, just where I remembered it to be, is an arched Door with a dull brass handle. At the very top, right in the middle, is the tiny golden clover.

Tabitha frowns, but she takes the handle and says, "Have the idea of going to Melbourne firm in your mind, all right? Since neither of us have been there, I don't know where the Doors are going to shoot us out."

That's when the world starts to shake. **Again.**

"Not this again." I brace myself against the wall and drag Tabitha alongside me; Jack stands with his feet and arms spread out, like he's balancing on a skateboard.

It doesn't last anywhere near as long as the last one, but it's enough to steal the breath from my lungs. But when I open my eyes, no one else seems to have noticed what happened. Everyone goes about their business as though a massive earthquake didn't just rock the foundations of the city.

"You felt that, right?" Jack asks, his voice hoarse and shaking. "I didn't imagine that? That happened?"

"Yeah, that happened," Tabitha says, staring right at him as though he's somehow the one responsible. She rips the Door open and nods at the glowing blue entrance. "We need to get out of here. Fast."

### XXX

I step out near a strange-shaped building made of flat panels fitted together like a mosaic, surrounded by pretty, old buildings, high church spires and green, domed roofs. It's night-time, still and quiet, bright all around, with reflected moonlight and scattered stars. But it's warm, too; it must be summer here, so we must have made it to somewhere in the southern hemisphere.

"Did we do it?" I ask as Tabitha stares at everything with wide eyes. "Is this Melbourne?"

"Yeah, this is Melbourne," Jack says, but he's frowning at me. "But what was that back there? It... it can't have been a real earthquake. Not right in the middle of London."

"You said, not again, back there," Tabitha says, her eyes narrowed. "What did you mean?"

That's the funny part; I've got no idea what I meant. "It doesn't matter. If we backtracked over everything weird that happened we'd never get anywhere. So," I say to Jack, "this is Melbourne? You're sure?"

Jack nods. "Mum's from around here. We come back every couple of years. We're in Federation Square."

"So," Tabitha says with a sly, sideways smile, "you have family here?"

Jack shakes his head. "Not here, a little way out of the city. An aunt and uncle."

"So, we can leave you with them, right?"

Jack quirks an eyebrow. "Not unless you reckon you could come up with a good enough excuse for how I appeared here? Without my parents or any luggage?"

Tabitha scoffs. "How is that my problem? You followed us, remember?"

"Wait — are you... is he the one who got us here?" I ask. "Is that possible?"

"No," Tabitha says, shaking her head so fast she'll probably get whiplash. "The Doors can't read his head; he's got no magic, remember?"

"Well, we got here somehow," I remind her. "I didn't know what to picture, and I doubt you did, either."

"Look, Audrey," Tabitha says wearily. "I'm following you around, opening Doors and waving the wand when you need it. I've got no idea what's going on in between all this, except that **this kid isn't supposed to be here.**"

Tabitha yawns, rubs at her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. "Guys. It's late. Or early. I don't know, but we're not getting anything done now, so maybe we should set up camp somewhere for the night and get some sleep." She disappears around the corner without another word or a glance back.

I slide my backpack off my shoulder and dump it on the ground. It's like my leg gives up right then, too, because I slide down the wall and land on the paved ground in a mangled heap.

I wince as I unlatch all the bits and pieces holding my prosthetic to my body. Jack watches me out the corner of his eye. Whenever I glance over, he looks away like something shiny caught his eye.

"You can ask, if you want," I say.

He lets out a laugh so awkward that it almost makes me smile. "Wouldn't that be weird?"

"It might," I say, without looking up. "But I'm giving you permission, so..."

"I didn't mean to make everything weird," Jack says. I can just about hear him cringing. "I just... didn't notice it before. And now, and..." He drops his head in his cupped hands. "I'm sorry."

"What for? Nothing happened to it. Not really. I was born without it."

"Oh." Jack stares at the ground. "Does it... hurt?"

I shake my head. "The seam — the bit of skin right on the end — kind of hurts when I walk around for too long, though."

Jack hums, and I can see his shadow nodding. "I guess that makes sense. Does it hurt now?"

I bite my lip. "A little."

"You can keep going, you know, if you need to. I don't care... I mean... it doesn't bother me or anything. Not that it would matter if it did, since —"

I cut him off with a laugh that echoes all through the empty space.

"I know what you mean. What happened to your arm?" I ask as I fish a wipe from my bag.

"Oh. Just... an accident. Fell off my bike. Landed weird. Broke it pretty bad."

"And you still went on holiday?"

He shrugs. "Tickets were already bought, so..."

He goes quiet, then says, "They said I nearly lost it."

"Really?"

"It was a pretty bad break, and they didn't find me for a while. Doctors said I was lucky."

"Oh. I guess you are, yeah."

"So," Jack says after a long stretch of quiet. "Are you a witch, too?"

"Magician. And yes, technically, but it's kind of dumb."

"Why?"

"It just is. Causes way more problems than it solves."

"It must be kind of neat, though, right?"

I discard the wipe and lean back against my backpack. It's lumpy, hard in places, but better than resting flat on the ground. "You'd think so, but it isn't. At least, not until you're old enough to do it yourself."

"How much longer do you have to wait?"

"Four more years. Three and a half, really. Then I'll get a wand of my own."

"Not that long."

"I guess not."

I listen to him let out a breath, and the soft crinkle of his ski jacket as he pummels it into a pillow. "Good night, Audrey."

I yawn and close my eyes. "Good night, Jack. Oh, and by the way?"

"Yeah?"

"Ghosts, dragons, and vampires? They aren't real. I was messing with you."

He chuckles. "I knew it."

"Fairies everywhere, though. And a yeti near where Tabitha lives."

"Wait, what?"

**XXX**

The first rays of morning light burn into my eyes. I prop myself up against the warm wall and groan, blinking against the white spots blurring my vision. A few people are already up and walking about, staring at us slumped against the building like we're criminals or something.

"I miss my bed," I mutter to myself. "Get up, Tabby. It's morning," I say with another great yawn.

On my other side, Jack lets out a tragic moan and swings his arm out wide. "Why is it so hot here already?"

"It's summer here," I say, fanning myself.

"Well," Tabitha says, tugging at her shirt, "it's nasty. It never gets this hot in Switzerland."

I roll my eyes. "You live on top of the Matterhorn. Of course it doesn't get this hot."

"You live on top of a mountain?" Jack says with a grin. "Like, literally on top?"

Tabitha nods. "Balanced right on the tip."

"Does it ever fall down?"

Tabitha shoots him a withering look. "Come on, kids, get it together. It's only gonna get hotter."

We pack our bags in silence, angling ourselves as best we can in the heavy shadows of the buildings. I reattach my leg, and we're off.

### XXX

We've been walking for hours. The sun is high and blinding in the sky. There's no sign of Sir Arthur Codswallop, or where he might live, or where he might have been. All I've got to show for this whole journey so far is an itchy, sweaty socket, and a bad sunburn.

As Jack cuts ahead with purpose, like he knows exactly where we're meant to go, I limp up to Tabitha's side. "Hey, Tabitha?"

"Yeah?" She glances at me and frowns a little behind her giant sunglasses. "Are you doing all right?"

"I'll be fine. I was thinking... Dad's note said that Melbourne was Sir Arthur Codswallop's **last** known location, not where he is now. So, what if he's not here anymore? That note was pretty old."

"I think that someone as powerful and important as Sir Arthur sounds would have left tracks of some sort. If he is gone, someone will know where he went. We'll find him, Audrey. I promise."

My next words drown in my mouth as the world turns to water.

My heart gallops like a racehorse as I flail through the water. Did I trip into a pond? No, it's way too deep for that, too wide and **everywhere**. But all around me... there's that familiar, magical tingle that tells me not everything is quite as it seems.

The mermaids with the kelp hair, staring at me with yellow, lamp-like eyes like they want to eat me, aren't helping matters.

I seal my mouth shut, paddling my feet as I throw my arms out wide, searching for a wall, for a ceiling, anything that might be able to tell me what's happening.

A narrow speck of light glitters above me, shimmering back and forth like it isn't fixed to any one place. I glance again at the merfolk watching me like I'm their next meal, and kick towards the surface.

It's not easy for me to kick through water. I took swimming lessons when I was a kid, with a special waterproof prosthetic and everything, but I'm no future Olympian. I kick against the weight of it harder, faster, until that speck of light widens —

Widens —

Opens.

I break through a tingling barrier and emerge through murky water with a great gasp for air. I blink at my surroundings; am I still in Melbourne? I don't recognise enough of anything to give me a definitive answer.

I wade out of the river — wait, a river? Wasn't I on a concrete footpath? — and collapse onto the grass at its edge. On the other side, there's stalls and throngs of people. How didn't anyone notice me? I shake my head and unlatch my leg to pour out all the water. All the spare liners I packed are probably soaked through, too. **Great.**

But I can't panic. Just because I've been separated from Tabitha and Jack and have no idea where I am —

— There's nothing to stop me from panicking.

The skyline is **kind of** familiar. The top of the building Jack said was called the Eureka Skydeck is in view, all stripy and angular. At least, I'm pretty sure it's the Eureka Skydeck...

I squeeze the water out of my shirt and lie against the riverbank. There's not much else I can do but wait to dry off a little, since I can't walk around too much with a wet seam and socket.

"Audrey!"

Two pairs of footsteps gallop towards me. The closer Tabitha gets, the more she looks like a cartoon character, with her wide, wild eyes and her hair flying everywhere. Jack trundles behind her with his mouth pressed into a thin, firm line, as though Tabitha's already given him a good screaming to.

"What happened?" Jack asks when they're close enough. "We thought we lost you."

"I don't know," I say, because it's all I really can say. "I don't know what happened."

One minute, I was with you guys, and the next —"

"Were you **ever** going to mention that you're a Pathfinder?" Tabitha asks, panting.

"A what?"

"She's a what?" Jack asks at the same time.

"A Pathfinder!" Tabitha says again, not even sparing a glance at Jack. "You can travel through an element! You walked through a sodding puddle and you fell into it! Jack screamed and everything! I had to use my **wand in public** to find you!"

"I did not," Jack mutters. "You're the one who screamed, you liar."

Tabitha ignores him again. "You can travel through water!"

Still no reason to be treating me like some sort of criminal. Or, is it? "I didn't know!"

"Has it ever happened before?"

"I don't know!" I yell. "Look, I'm fine, just... how was I supposed to know?"

"It's just... jeez, Audrey. What would I have told Grandma if I lost you? Or your parents? What if something happened to you? We're on the other side of the world, no one knows where we are, or what we're doing... I'm just following your lead and I've got no idea what's happening anymore..."

Jack's eyes dart between us like he's watching a game of tennis.

"Let's just go," I say. I've got nothing to apologise for, but judging from Tabitha's monstrous glare, I think she thinks differently. I reattach my prosthetic to my sodden sock and throw my soaked backpack over my shoulder. "I need to find somewhere to dry my leg off properly. And we need to find Sir Arthur soon."

"You're looking for Sir Arthur?" a wheezy voice says behind me. "You're in the right place, young lady."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

There's an old man in front of me, dressed in a fine suit complete with a vest and coattails. His hands are crossed behind his back, and there's an expectant look in his beetle-black eyes that makes me shiver.

And I'm pretty sure he wasn't there before.

"You look a little damp," he says. "Do you mind if I take the liberty?"

"I —"

The old man snaps his fingers and a warm breeze shoots through me, drying and warming me from the inside out. Even my sock is toasty-warm and dry again.

"There you are. Good as new."

"I... thank you?"

"You're very welcome. Now, you did say that you're looking for Sir Arthur Codswallop, didn't you?" the man asks with a pleasant grin.

"Yes," I say carefully. "Do you know where he is?"

The man says nothing, just tips his head up to the clouds in the sky. Funny; there weren't any clouds before. "He's up there somewhere. I forget which one — clouds all look the same, really, wouldn't you agree? — but once you get up there, he should be easy to find. For such a revered figure, he has no sense of subtlety in his old age."

I glance between the clouds and this strange man. "How are we meant to get up there?"

"Ah!" he cackles and steps towards me. "A tourist! Well, then, I think the trial is in order."

"Trial?" I step back and land on Jack's foot. "What sort of trial?"

“Magicians from over both worlds seek out Codswallop’s counsel,” the man explains as he tugs off his white gloves. “He can’t possibly see them all. It is my task to find those most worthy.”

My heart feels like it’s doing cartwheels in my chest. “And how do I do that?”

The man grins again, but there’s nothing about it that I trust. “You prove yourself, of course.”

I glance between Tabitha and Jack, who I’m pretty sure haven’t blinked since the man appeared. “How?”

The old man rubs his hands together. “Well, you’re only a young thing... not out for fame and riches yet, I’d wager. Hold still, young lady; this won’t hurt a bit.”

People only say that when it’s definitely going to hurt.

He clasps his weathered hands on either side of my face. His eyes bore into mine like they’re reading my soul. Thankfully, it doesn’t itch anywhere near as much as when Grandma digs through my brain.

“You’re an interesting one, aren’t you,” the old man says at last, smiling as he removes his hands from my face and steps back. “Pure of heart. Kind and honourable. Unfortunately, uncommon traits amongst our people.

“I have deemed your intentions noble.” The old man bows. “You have earned your audience with Sir Arthur Codswallop.”

“Thank you,” I say again. “But how do we get up there?”

“Well, you can’t **all** go up there. Your young man will need to stay behind, though he is a fascinating conundrum, I must say.” The old man smiles at Jack, who takes an immediate step backwards. I don’t blame him one bit. “You and your cousin will take hands, close your eyes, and count to three.”

“Why?” Tabitha asks through gritted teeth. Her hands are set on her hips, clenching as though she’s got weapons stored there. Somehow, though, I don’t think she’d be able to manage much with her wand against this man. He smiles at us some more — has the smile lapsed even once since he appeared?

“Because sending you up so high, so fast, might blow your eyeballs right out of your head if there’s not something keeping them in place. Messy business, cleaning eyeballs off the riverbank. Not everyone listens.”

He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. I can’t tell if he’s joking or not.

“Don’t worry about your friends, young man,” the old man says to Jack, with a strange glint in his eyes. “They’re in safe hands. And we’ll have plenty to discuss while they’re away.

“Now, ladies, close your eyes, please. This won’t hurt a bit.” “So long as I keep my eyes closed,” Tabitha mutters, but she does as she’s told.

“Are you both ready?”

I nod, but I’m not sure I am.

“Oh, and I’ll have to take that for the moment, too.”

Before either of us can blink, the old man yanks Tabitha’s wand from her sleeve.

She gives him a look that could set a forest on fire.

“Give that back, you —”

“— Soon enough, I assure you. Now, on three? One... two... three.”

The old man snaps his fingers, and the ground disappears from beneath us.

All the air in the world rushes past us as we surge through the sky on the strongest gust of wind ever. My cheeks flare out and flap in the wind, and I really hope my leg doesn’t detach and fly off to hit someone. How would you even explain something like that, getting concussed by a flying prosthetic?

Almost a full minute later, the wind roller-coaster stops, but I’m still not sure about opening my eyes yet. Or my mouth.

This time, the ground is soft beneath me, like I’ve landed on a giant mound of fairy floss. If I concentrate, I can force my hand clean through to the other side, where there’s only sky.

“Hey, Audrey.” Tabitha shakes my shoulder. “Open your eyes. You have got to see this!”

I pry one eye open, then the other, and gasp at my alien surroundings.

The cloud is tiny, maybe fifty paces across, solid enough but completely see-through. We're up so high there's no detail to the ground, just huge patches of green and silver from the grass, the buildings, and the water. If I look far enough into the horizon, I can see the curve of the earth.

Wispy clouds form stairs leading up to a tall, narrow castle, with high spires and latticed windows. At the top is a weathervane, topped off with a golden clover that glints in the fading sunlight.

The front door creaks open before either of us can move. Nothing comes out; it swings back and forth on its creaky hinges.

"Okay," Tabitha says as she stands. "That was weird."

"I've seen weirder." I let Tabitha pull me back to my feet. "Come on. I think he's waiting for us."

We cross the castle's threshold and jump as the door slams behind us. When we turn, there's a curious figure staring back at us that could only be one person.

Arthur Codswallop is **old**. Older than anyone I've ever seen. His skin is deep brown, tinged with pink on the apples of his cheeks as though he's blushing, with as many deep wrinkles as a folded blanket. His eyes glint like gems, peering out at us under thick, bushy eyebrows. His hair is a shock of patchy white, sticking up and out in all directions, topped off with a tall top-hat like a circus ringmaster.

The second thing I notice is his tweed suit. Old, too, but well-kept and neatly patched. Lime-green with bright yellow edges, sky-blue buttons and a deep, crimson-red inner lining.

But he's smiling a much more welcoming smile than the man on the ground.

I wonder how Jack is doing down there. I think the man wanted to dissect him.

"Hello, there," he says pleasantly.

"Hello."

"Are you lost?" he asks.

"I don't think so," I say. "You're Sir Arthur Codswallop, aren't you?"

He grins, and it makes his eyes disappear into his deep wrinkles. “Yes, that’s me. Though the title is more honorary than official these days. And who might you be?”

I clear my throat and step forward. “My name is Audrey Muffinstump, and I’m —”

“— Muffinstump?” Sir Arthur repeats, blinking. “As in, Eudora Muffinstump?”

I share a look with Tabitha, and we both nod. “That’s our grandma.”

“Grandma?” He laughs, and it’s such a genuinely pleased sound that I can’t help but smile back. “Good heavens, I didn’t know Eudora even had children of her own! And grandchildren, too? Oh my, it’s been so **long**. Come, please, we must share some tea!”

He leads us down a narrow hall — not even big enough for us to walk side by side — and beckons for us to follow. There’s no light save for an open window at the very end, but there’s enough to see the portraits of Sir Arthur that cover both sides of the wall as we go. Hundreds upon thousands of them stacked from floor to ceiling, getting older, and newer, too, the further we venture down the hall.

“I must apologise for my guard on the ground,” Sir Arthur says. “He’s still a little quick to assume the worst, even after all these years.”

“He said I’m pure of heart. What did he mean by that?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Not just anyone can come here, you know.”

“Well, what would have happened if I wasn’t pure of heart?”

“You know, I’ve never thought to ask.” He winks, and much like the man on the ground, I’ve got no idea if he’s joking or not.

The hall opens into a small, airy kitchen full of tiny pots overflowing with tiny, yellow flowers and lush, vividly green bushels. As Sir Arthur moves through them, they reach out to him with tiny, leafy tendrils. Some seem to bud and bloom and grow even more just by having him near them.

“Your grandmother was a fan of fresh chamomile tea some time ago,” Sir Arthur tells them as he plucks — or, rather, they hand themselves over — a handful of small, yellow flowers from the plant closest to him. “I think you might enjoy it, too.”

"You knew our grandmother?" I ask as I sink into one of the old, plush couches.

Tabitha drops like a rock beside me, her arms crossed tight over her chest.

"I did," Sir Arthur says as he hands me a cup. "Some time ago. We haven't spoken in... oh, it feels like **centuries** now."

"I don't think she's ever mentioned you."

Sir Arthur smiles sadly. "I can't say I blame her. In any case," he says as he pours, "what can I do for you?"

"My father said you might be able to help me," I say. "Can you?"

"I suppose it depends," Sir Arthur says, "on what it is you need help with."

"And please, think carefully before you answer," he goes on before I can say anything.

"It's a common affliction in those your age, to ask for one thing when you mean to ask for something else."

I pull my father's note from my pocket. I twist it between my fingers — the paper is still a little damp, but it's still holding together — before I hand it over.

He clucks his tongue as he reads. "I thought something like this might happen again. Your parents, too?" he asks Tabitha.

Tabitha nods stiffly. "They went missing around the same time, we think."

Sir Arthur hums, but says nothing.

"Sir Arthur," I begin, "can I ask... who you are? Why would my father tell me to find you?"

Without looking up from the note, Sir Arthur says, "I do not know your father, nor your mother. Can I ask, which one sees the future?"

"Why do you ask?"

His eyes sparkle. "This note is vastly older than you, Miss Muffinstump."

I swallow. "My mother. She said it came to her in dreams."

"**Fascinating**. Such gifts have become all too rare in our kind. And to be a Seer, too?"

He folds the note back together as though it's a rare treasure and sets it on the table

between us. "As for your question, I believe your parents told you to find me, because they felt I might know where they are being kept. Your parents, and many others."

"Others?"

"Most likely, yes."

"And, **do** you know where they are?"

"I have an idea."

"Just an idea?" Tabitha snorts. I elbow her side.

"I don't know what you've heard of me, dear girl," Sir Arthur says, a hint of reproach in his tone, "but my ideas are rarely wrong.

"The last time anything like this happened," he goes on, "was over a thousand years ago. I trust that you are well-versed in the story of one Wallace Poultrygeist, no?"

I blink once, twice. "Yes, I am."

"Ah, but not all of it, child. Not all of it."

"What do you mean? What does he have to do with anything?"

"I mean, certain parts of our history were erased, burned to ashes with our city all those centuries ago. If the truth came to light, I fear our kind may never have felt safe again. But perhaps, in hindsight, concealing the truth caused far more harm than good."

I lean forward. "What does this have to do with my parents?"

"It has **everything** to do with them, dear girl. And you, and your cousins, your grandmother, that young man you brought with you, and even me. All these events happening now? Families and magical items going missing? Even the earthquakes that have been following you around? They're all connected, and it all points to one thing, Miss Muffinstump," Sir Arthur says with a deep frown. "It means Wallace Poultrygeist is not as dead as history makes him out to be.

"It means he's as alive as he ever was."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Poultrygeist is alive?” I whisper. “But that’s **impossible**. He was in middle of the explosion when it happened, and that was a thousand years ago.”

Sir Arthur smiles, as though living for a thousand years through explosions is a normal thing to do, like he did it last week. “Some of us are long-lived sorts, with even longer memories. You should talk to your grandmother about it some time.

“The magical community had every reason to believe the rumours of Poultrygeist’s death. He had been at the very centre of the explosion that claimed the final city, and his body was never found. But there was a secret that Poultrygeist kept close to his heart. So close, no one ever knew about it, except for his very closest friends. He’s what we call —”

“A Pathfinder,” I whisper.

Sir Arthur’s eyes widen. “You’ve heard of Pathfinders?”

“I think...” I trade another look with Tabitha, who just rolls her eyes and stares out the window. “I think I might be one. I can fall through water.”

Sir Arthur’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second before settling again. “A perfect foil to Poultrygeist, then, who travels through flames.

“All these happenings are in line with what Poultrygeist attempted to do back then, to bring the magical realm back to its former glory at the expense of all others. He cannot be allowed to succeed, or even fail, again.”

I set my cup on the table and lean back in the seat, so he won’t hear my heart thumping. “Can you please tell me where he is?”

Sir Arthur sighs. “In all good conscience, young miss, I’m not sure I should.”

“Of course, you should!” I exclaim. “You know what he’s doing. He’s got my parents. Tabitha’s parents. Our family’s magical items and who knows how many others. You can guess what he’s planning, too, can’t you? Someone has to stop him.”



“So why must this perilous task fall to you?” he asks, his frown deepening the lines around his face even more. “A seasoned magician with an army to back him up would have difficulty. You’re so young, and with your leg, too?”

“Never mind my leg,” I say. “I made it this far, didn’t I?”

“I meant no slight on your abilities, young miss. I only meant that this is a journey I’d recommend to no one.”

“If no one can do it, then who will?”

Sir Arthur lets out a sigh so long and strong that he seems to deflate with the force of it.

“He will be expecting you,” Sir Arthur whispers. “It’s no coincidence that first coded letter reached you in the first place.”

I think I’ve known that the whole time. “I understand the risks.”

“And your cousin?” He stares Tabitha down with his beetle eyes until she flags beneath his gaze. “Is she also willing to risk this journey, knowing full well how it might end?”

Tabitha still isn’t looking at us. “Sure.”

Sir Arthur stares at Tabitha a little longer; I’m not convinced, either.

“The Healy Volcano,” Sir Arthur says at last. “An underwater volcano, near the Kermadec Islands. Poultrygeist is confined to a cave there, underneath the water.”

“Kermadec Islands?” I frown. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“They’re off the north-eastern coast of New Zealand. Not too far from here, considering the length and breadth of the globe and all worlds encompassing it. I’ll provide you with coordinates, so you can know where they are without exactly... knowing where they are, if you understand me.”

“How are we supposed to get to an underwater volcano?” Tabitha bursts to her feet and looms over us both. “First, my parents go missing. Whatever. They kind of do that a lot. Then it’s a journey across the world and back again that I never, not once asked for, babysitting a cousin I haven’t seen in years and a kid that should never have come along with us to begin with. Then, it’s a castle in the sky that I have to get hurled at to reach. I’ve

been hurt, panicked more than is probably healthy, and I'm in so far over my own head that I don't know how I'm still walking. And now — **now** — you're telling me we're meant to get **inside a volcano?**"

"I won't lie; it will be treacherous for the both of you," Sir Arthur says mildly. "Not to mention the interesting young lad you have with you. Miss Audrey will need to be holding onto both of you when she makes the slip between the worlds to get there, and you won't have much energy left, assuming you arrive at the correct location. Poultrygeist has the added advantage of his particular gift, which neither of you share."

"We'll be all right," I say with a resolute nod. "We'll have to be."

Sir Arthur sighs. "There's no scenario where I talk you out of this, is there?" He reaches for his cane, topped with a brass head of a fish, and stands. "When you find him, Miss Audrey, I beg you to keep your wits about you. He has always been a charismatic, devious man, accustomed to getting his own way. I would hate for you to fall victim to pretty words and hollow promises."

"You knew him, didn't you?" I ask. "You were friends with Poultrygeist?"

Sir Arthur lets out a rattling sigh. "I did. We were friends. Him, me, your grandmother, and another gentleman named Magnus." His weathered lips tug into a gentle, wistful smile. "We were best friends. Inseparable."

"What happened?"

"Wallace happened," Sir Arthur shrugs. "The man could charm a fish out of water with words alone. His dreams outgrew us all, and before we could see it, he was a man blind with power, with a desire to see his world remade. His desire for restoration was one I didn't share, wanted no part in. The cost... it would have been far too steep. Magnus stayed awhile, but his limits were reached not long after I departed."

"And our..." I swallow; do I really want to know? "Our grandmother? Where was she in all this?"

"I think..." Sir Arthur gazes out the window, frowning. "I think that is a question best saved for her. Her part in all this is not my story to tell."

"What was she?" Tabitha asks shortly.

"Ask her someday. Her tale is far more interesting than mine. But your tale, on the other hand, cannot progress sitting here as we are. But before you go..."

He shuffles to a cabinet in the corner twice as tall as he is and starts pulling out drawers and opening doors, muttering under his breath. Tabitha and I exchange a look and jump when Sir Arthur lets out a great, "Ah-ha!"

"Take these with you, too." He pushes a pair of small, tubes into my hands, made of bright blue rubber, with a notch in the middle and a thick meshing closing either end. "So your cousin and friend on the ground will be able to make the swim to the volcano with you. These will help them breathe."

I furrow my brows. "You think I should take Jack?"

Sir Arthur nods. "Absolutely. He will be an invaluable part of your plan. Tabitha, you'll also need a very particular spell..."

He busies himself with his cabinet again and lifts out an old, heavy book bigger than my torso. As he turns the pages, the paper is so thin and frail I can see through it.

"Here it is..." he murmurs to himself. He tugs a short pencil — how can he hold it with his gnarled fingers? — from behind his ear and jots some words down on a paper scrap.

"This will counteract the effects of the hot water, lest you be boiled alive," he tells Tabitha as he hands her the scrap. "You'll need to cast it individually, but it shouldn't be too difficult for you."

Tabitha gives him another scathing look; I elbow her side again.

"Thank you," I say for her.

"And this one, too, perhaps. I can't say for absolute certain that you'll need it, but better safe than sorry, I think. You're entering hostile territory; sulphuric water, unimaginable heat. Who knows what creatures may lurk in those conditions?"

"And for last..." He darts back into the kitchen and rummages through a shelf above the sink, pulling out tiny glass vials and holding them up to his eyes before sliding them back.

"Here we are," he mutters. "A restorative. You will get tired," he tells me. "That is inevitable. But this should counteract the effects to an extent. Not all the way, but you'll be able to hold your head up well enough."

"Thank you," I say again.

He pauses in front of us and smiles, though it looks more like a grimace. "I think that's all I can help you with for now. I bid you the very best of luck on your journey, Miss Audrey, Miss Tabitha, and even your little friend down below. And do visit again, won't you? It gets so very lonely up here some days." Sir Arthur snaps his fingers, and the room dissolves.

### XXX

My heart is pounding when Tabitha and I reappear on solid land. The contents of my stomach swirl together like a storm, churning until I think I might throw up.

Jack scrambles back to his feet and holds out Tabitha's wand, twirling it like a baton. Tabitha scowls and snatches it from him. She carves it through the air and a bright burst of blood-red sparks snap and pop in its wake.

"Where'd that old creep go?" she says through gritted teeth. "I owe him one. Or a hundred."

"He said there was someone else looking for Sir Arthur Codswallop, and he had to go test them." Jack shrugs. "I don't think I'll ever get used to people appearing and disappearing in front of me."

"Lucky thing you won't have to, kid. We're coming into the home stretch now."

"We are? He told you what you needed?"

I nod, but it feels like my neck is creaking on rusty hinges. "I know what the next step is."

"Hey! That's great!"

"Yeah, I guess."

Jack's smile vanishes. "Then what's the matter?"

"We need to get to a volcano."

"A volcano?" Jack's smile reappears, wide and excited. "Wicked. But what could you find in a volcano that hasn't melted already?"

I glare at him. "My parents, for one thing."

"And mine," Tabitha adds, crossing her arms. "You know, maybe. If they haven't **melted already.**"

"Oh." The tips of his ears burn a bright, violent pink. "I'm... sorry. That sucks."

I sigh and rub at the back of my neck. The closer we get to an ending, the itchier I get.

"Yeah. It does."

"So, what are we gonna do about it?"

He's still got that weird, excited look about him that hasn't disappeared since he first knocked me through that Door back in Zermatt. Was that only yesterday? It feels like we've been at this for weeks. "You still want to help?"

"Hey!" He grins, and I wonder if Jack isn't the craziest person alive. "I've come this far, haven't I? What's our next step?"

I smile a little at his enthusiasm. "We go find an underwater volcano, I guess."

"Great. Easy." Jack nods. "So, do we take a Door there, or what?"

I shake my head. "No. We're swimming. Like Sir Arthur said."

"But that's ridiculous!" Tabitha bursts out. "And **you** swim." She gestures frantically between her and Jack. "We don't!"

Jack raises his hand. "I, uh... I swim pretty well, actually."

I ignore him. "Sir Arthur said I'd be able to take you if you held onto me."

"Yeah, and that you'd be no better than a drained battery once we got there. Even if we did get there in one piece, what would I be able to do against someone like Poultrygeist?"

"I don't know. Try, maybe?"

"It's not that easy and you know it!" Tabitha tugs at her hair and growls. "Why do you make it so difficult to keep you safe, Audrey?"

"If this is about my leg —"

“— This has never had anything to do with your leg!” she explodes. “It has everything to do with your blind belief in what everyone else is telling you. You get a single note from your dad and start hopping between countries you’ve never been to without even thinking if it’s even a good idea first. And now you want to swim to an underwater volcano and take on a thousand-year-old zombie wizard, just because some other, equally crusty old wizard told you to? Audrey, do you have any idea how insane that sounds?”

All I can do is shrug, because she’s dead right; it is completely insane. “But I have to do it.”

Tabitha lets out a powerful sigh. “Why you?”

“Why not me?”

“For so, so, so many reasons, Audrey, it should not be you. Or me. Or Jack, even.” Tabitha collapses into a ball on the grass and rests her head against her bent knees. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she whispers. “I don’t know if I can keep you and the kid safe, help my parents, and do whatever magic you need, Audrey. It’s all... it’s too much.”

I flinch and ball my hands into fists. Since we crashed back after seeing Sir Arthur, they haven’t stopped trembling.

Because it’s **huge**. All of it is massive and scary and horrible, and all I want right now, more than anything else in the world, is for Mum to hug me, and for Dad to tell me that everything is going to be okay, even if it’s not true. Tabitha’s right: it shouldn’t be me, or any of us. But it is, and we are, and it’s going to work. It has to.

**It has to.**

I pat Tabitha on the shoulder again and turn to find Jack looking between us like he’s not sure what’s going to happen next.

“Here.” I give him one of the rubber tubes. “This should help you breathe while we’re underwater.”

“Tabitha?” Tabitha raises her head and surveys me with wet, red-rimmed eyes. “Can you cast that spell now, please?”

“No, I don’t think I can.” She swipes at her eyes aggressively and leaps to her feet. “I’m really sorry, little cousin, but I don’t think I can do it anymore.”

Before I can say anything — anything at all — Tabitha shoves her wand back up her sleeve and sprints away, up the nearby staircase and back towards the city centre.

Where she must know I can’t follow her.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Tabitha!”

Tabitha runs so fast, she blurs. The heavy crowds don’t seem to notice her streaking through them like a comet. In the space between blinks, she’s gone. I’d be impressed, maybe, if it didn’t feel like she’d ripped out my heart on her way.

“Tabitha,” I whisper again.

Jack swallows. “Want me to go chase her?” he asks.

“I...” I don’t know what to say. But what’s the point? Tabitha’s gone. Probably to some other back Door around Melbourne. Back to her home on top of the Matterhorn. Without us. My knees buckle. I lash out and grab the nearest rail to keep from collapsing. People swerve right past me like nothing is wrong.

I **knew** something wasn’t right with Tabitha. I knew it but I... I didn’t know what to do about it — if there’s anything I **could** have done about it.

What am I supposed to do now?

“Hey.” Jack’s hand lands on my shoulder and squeezes. “Are you okay?”

“Okay?” I laugh, but it’s not **my** laugh. “Of course I’m not okay! **We’re** not okay! Tabitha’s... gone, and we’re stranded and **no**. No, I am not okay!”

He lets me slide down to the ground and follows me there a moment later, our knees bumping together. We sit in silence, save for the chatter all around us, and I have no idea what we’re doing. Any plan I had have flown out the window. A few hot, angry tears leak from my eyes, but I banish them with a vicious swipe of my hand.

“You know,” Jack says after a long moment has passed, tipping his head towards me. “I’m hungry.”

I blink at him. “What?”

“I said, I’m hungry.”



"Yeah, I got that, but... now? **Really?**"

"What? I'm a growing boy." He puffs himself out like it's something to be proud of. "I'm pretty sure I still have some Australian money packed away in my wallet from last time I was here. I could get us some lunch, if you want?"

Do I want? It's been... I haven't eaten since I left Grandma's house. That seems like forever ago, and my stomach must agree, because it chooses that exact moment to make an awful rumbling sound like another earthquake is on our heels.

Jack grins at me, triumphant. I'm not sure I know how to smile back right now.

"Come on," he says, leaping back to his feet. Some people appraise his ski gear, a ridiculous sight in Melbourne at the height of summer, but no one does or says anything. "We'll get some food and think about what we're gonna do next, all right?"

"Okay," I say eventually. "But we should... in case Tabitha comes back —"

"— How about you stay here, then," he says, waving at the ground with his casted arm, "and I go get us some chips from that food van over there?"

I glance over his shoulder; the van is maybe fifty metres away, well within eyesight, in case Tabitha does decide to come back.

He must see something in my face, because he turns and darts towards it without another word. Maybe he's just giving me the moment to be alone, and for now I'm more grateful for that than the idea of food.

People are still swarming past without really seeing me. Some cast me a glance as they pass, but no one stops. I guess the sight of a small girl in tears, with a prosthetic leg splayed at an odd angle, is something to avoid. I'm not even sure what I would say if someone asked me what's wrong.

**Oh, nothing, really. My cousin just ran off with her wand and left me and this other kid stranded in an unfamiliar city, that we got to via a magical portal, with no way of getting home. Which is a treehouse in the Bialowieza Forest in Poland. You know; the usual.**

Somehow, I don't think that would go down so well.

I tip my head back against the railing behind me and watch Jack edge closer and closer to the van's counter. There's no sign of Sir Arthur's cloud anymore; the sky's as blue as anything, and the sun is higher and brighter than any I've seen in Poland. The buildings glitter in the sunlight and the river ripples and shimmers in a way that's almost hypnotic. But the prettiness of this place does nothing to settle the roiling in my gut, and with nothing to temper it, it begins to boil over.

I shake with it. The scream bubbles up, but with nowhere to go so I swallow it back. My knuckles go white and I tear up again, but this time, I'm not upset by Tabitha leaving.

I'm **furious**.

If she was that scared, she could have said something. **Anything**. I'm scared, too; did she ever think of that? Did she ever think that maybe I could help her, the way she's been helping me this whole time? I'm trembling so hard I might as well be vibrating. If she ever comes back, I'll...

I don't know what I'll do.

"So, I was thinking." Jack appears out of nowhere, holding a small cardboard box of chips in front of my face. The kind of squeaky up-turns of his voice and the smell of salt are so unexpected in that moment that they jerk me out of my rage so fast I might have whiplash. "You could still take us to the volcano with your... water thing, couldn't you?"

"I... I really don't know," I tell him as I take the box from him. "I've never done it on purpose before, so there's no guarantees anyway. And even if I could, I still need Tabitha to cast the spells once we get there."

He sits beside me again and starts in on his food right away, munching like a sheep on grass. "Well, there's one thing in all that we **can** fix."

"What?"

"You said you never did your water thing on purpose," he says with his mouth full of half-chewed chips. I scrunch up my nose and move back an inch. "Maybe you should... I don't know, practice?"

"Practice?" I repeat.

"Yeah. How else do you think you'll get good at it? When Tabitha comes back, you'll both be good and ready." He smiles brightly, like there's nothing wrong with his logic, and tips back the rest of his chips. That was fast; I haven't even had one of mine yet. "Come on. Let's head back down to the water."

"But, if Tabitha doesn't —"

"— **She will**," Jack cuts in, firmly enough to surprise me. I didn't know if he cared or not, but I guess he's as lost in all this as I am, isn't he? "When she comes back, she'll be able to see us from the railing. We'll go somewhere and come right back. Easy, right?"

I raise a brow at him. "What do you mean, we?"

He grins like it's obvious. "I'll come with you, of course."

"I'm pretty sure you're not meant to get your cast wet."

"I'm not seriously about to start following rules now, am I? Not on a ridiculous journey full of magic, with a literal evil villain at the end!"

I'm quiet for a beat. "It's not ridiculous."

"You would say that, wouldn't you?"

"You're kind of annoying."

"I know. People hate reckless optimism and can-do attitudes. I guess that's my superpower."

I nibble at a chip to disguise my smile. "I guess you can come, then. I mean, I **do** have to learn how to bring people with me. It might as well be you."

"Well, hurry up and finish, then." He flashes me another grin and balls his ski jacket up to use as a cushion. "Not much time left, now."

**XXX**

"So," I say, as I stare over the rippling river water. "Where should we go?"

"I don't know." Jack shrugs. "Somewhere cool? I don't think I've ever been this hot before."

"What do you mean? You've been here before."

"Yeah. But we always come in winter, during my summer." He fans himself, and his forehead is starting to pink a little. "This is a bit much."

"Well..." I purse my lips. Cool places, huh... "How about Paris? It's winter there, and there's a certain theme park I could probably get us to."

Jack's smile widens into a grin. "You mean...?"

"Yep."

"With the castles and the roller coasters and the movie sets? And all the characters in costume?"

"That's the one."

He does a funny little excited hop from foot to foot. "Well, what are we waiting for, then?"

I suck in a breath. "All right. But we can't stay long." I hand him the tube Sir Arthur gave me. "Put this in your mouth," I tell him. "It'll help you breathe."

"Will I need it?"

"Who knows? I don't know how long it'll take to get us there. We could be in the water for hours."

I reach for his free hand and take it in mine, ignoring how gross and sweaty it is, because mine's no better. One last glance behind me, and I'm sure no one is watching us. We step off the riverbank and dip our toes into the water. I close my eyes and picture the castle hotel, with the high spires and the fountain out the front, and the world dissolves from the bottom up.

**XXX**

It feels like I'm sliding between the layers for hours before we finally emerge. I'm freezing again, which is a good thing for once, since we're definitely not where we were before.

What's not good, though, is how heavy my eyes and limbs are, how much I want to collapse already and take a long nap. Sir Arthur said travelling like this would tire me out. He wasn't joking. I can still hold my head up, still move through the water without too much of a problem, but don't know how many more times I'll be able to do this before I just... can't anymore.

"Holy — Audrey!" Jack exclaims, laughing. "You did it!"

I open my eyes and take it all in.

We're treading water in a fountain that must be turned off for now, overlooking a large, round courtyard. We're fenced-off from flowerbeds on either side, and a mounded garden full of meticulously manicured hedges and flowers that would be bright in the morning light but are subdued in the narrow strips of golden lamplight. Jack and I exchange a look and paddle towards the fence. The castle hotel looms above us, as tall and wide and beautiful as something out of every fairy-tale storybook. The windows are pocketed with bright lights and shadows of people moving beyond the curtains; a clock above the doors tell me it's close to midnight.

There aren't any costumed characters here, but there's a few people, so tired they could only have spent the entire day at the park, milling around the entrance wearing the famous mouse ears. The sky is full of stars, and the air swirling around us carries tiny flurries of snow that disappear before they can hit the ground. In the distance, lights are flashing and shutting off for the night, and so many different smells linger in the air, but none stand out over another. Last time I came here, I was between prosthetics and had to be in a wheelchair, but I wonder if I could make the walk the whole way around now.

It's pretty, and nostalgic, and exciting, but if we stay here much longer, I'm pretty sure we'll turn into a pair of icicles and have to get fished out by some very traumatised staff members.

I nudge Jack with my elbow. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"W-w-wicked," Jack breathes, his teeth chattering.

"Yeah." I take his hand, give it a squeeze, and close my eyes again. "Come on, we should go back."

XXX

I've never been so relieved to feel the sun burning like this.

I'm defrosting from the outside in, and it feels glorious. We're back in Melbourne, right where we started, across from the same chip stand, with the same buildings shining in the high, bright midday sun and the same rippling water. I fall across the riverbank and wonder what's the worst thing that could happen if I just curled myself up and fell asleep here. Aside from all the obvious things.

"Feeling confident yet?" Jack asks from beside me.

"I don't know." I close my eyes and listen to my heartbeat slow back to normal. "That took way too long, both times."

"You mean it wasn't meant to?"

"I don't know," I say again. "I just... if I'm taking you and Tabitha, I want it all to happen faster, you know? I don't want you to get hurt, or anything worse."

"We'll be fine," Jack says, way more confident than he ought to be, all things considered. "Want to try again?"

"In a minute," I say as I suck in another shaky breath. "It kind of takes it out of you, doing that."

"Makes sense." His grin still hasn't disappeared. "Where to next?"

"Why don't you pick," I tell him with a wave. "You've travelled around a lot, haven't you?"

"Yeah," he says, his smile halfway to a grimace. "There's been a lot of... holidays in my family, I guess."

"So, where was your favourite place?"

“Rome, I guess. My tu — we went to the Colosseum, the Roman Pantheon, the catacombs.” He sighs and smiles like he’s remembering something wonderful. “It was so cool.”

I almost scowl. “Can’t think of anywhere a bit closer?”

He grins sheepishly. “It was my favourite. I’d... I’d love to go back. Please?”

“Well, a peek will have to be enough.” I haul myself back to my feet and wait for Jack to join me. “Again?”

His eyes gleam. “Yeah, again. Heads up, though; you might not want to pop us up in the Tiber. The water’s a bit gross.”

“I don’t know how much say I have in where I appear.”

“Just... try? I think we might die if we swallow Tiber water.”

I roll my eyes. “How about the Trevi fountain, then? Pretty sure that’s not full of Tiber water.”

Jack snorts. “I mean, with all the coins and stuff in it, that’s probably not much better, but sure. Trevi fountain.”

### XXX

We spook a flock of pigeons when we emerge this time.

It’s early morning here, too, but the fountain is completely lit. There are even a few people around, their backs towards us as they pose for pictures. I wonder if we’ll appear in any of them. How will they explain two random kids in the fountain when they look back on them later?

It didn’t take as long to get here this time. At least, I don’t think it did. It still felt like we were sliding between the water for ages, but this time it was maybe more like falling for one hour instead of three. So far, though, I think it might be easier to slip between layers than to slip through to other parts of the same layer. Maybe the falling motion is more literal when you’re doing that — going down rather than going sideways.

"Wow," Jack says. His cast is wet beyond repair by now, and his shock of messy lack hair is stuck like a spider to his head, but of all the things I've dragged him through so far, he seems happier here than ever. He stares at the sculptures standing tall and grand behind us with something bordering on reverence.

I can't blame him. Up this close, I feel like I should be quiet, like maybe we're doing something incredibly wrong by being in the water like this. As beautiful as the castle in Paris was... this is something else altogether.

"It's... uh, a lot bigger than I expected," I whisper.

"Yeah," Jack says happily. "It's massive, but this place is so small it makes it look even bigger. That's Oceanus in the middle, God of the ocean. The horse things are called Hippocamps, half horse and half fish. Those other things are Tritons, kinda like mermen —"

"— They're nothing like mermen," I tell him with a smirk.

He rolls his eyes. "Ancient Roman mermen, smartie. They're trying to settle the Hippocamps down, 'cause they're all stirred up. The whole thing is meant to be about taming the waters, 'cause this used to be where three aqueducts met back in ancient times. Trevi is **tre vie** – three roads. Get it?"

"Cool," I say, as Jack continues to point out the important icons to me. His happiness is almost infectious. Even though I'm more tired than I've ever been in my life, I smile while he speaks.

"How'd you learn all this?"

He smiles. "An old teacher I used to have. He knew so much about these times, and he was always so vivid when he talked about it, too. He used to make it seem like he was actually there when it was happening."

I feel a shudder go through me that has nothing to do with the cold of the place, but I dismiss it as quick as it came. Jack's tutor was probably a genuine expert. It's not like people who study ancient history are that rare. The odds of him ever being taught by a magician are lower than low...



"Hey, thanks for this," he whispers, giving my hand a quick squeeze. "I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to come back here."

"Why not?"

"Just... some things changed at home and I wasn't all that sure anymore, that's all."

Jack lets out a breath and gives my hand a gentle shake. "Ready to head back?"

"Yeah. I might fall over when we get back, though."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just... a little bit dizzy. What about you, though? Are you all right?"

He hums and bounces a little, like he's been reenergised by being here. "Kinda feels like stepping off a roller coaster when we come out of the water, the way your stomach's all swoopy and your head's swimming, but in a cool way, like I can't wait to do it again." He holds my hand a little tighter and takes another step backwards. "I'm good to go if you are."

"Just be ready to maybe catch me," I mutter as I close my eyes, and we're off again.

### XXX

We pop up in Melbourne again. The sun is lower in the sky, but somehow it feels even hotter. As predicted though, as soon as we break the water, I immediately collapse.

"Audrey?" Jack lunges and catches me just before I fall back into the water. Half passed out and confused, who knows where I would have ended up if I accidentally water-travelled again?

"I'm okay," I slur, groggy and not quite in control of my limbs just yet. "In... my backpack... front pocket... little vial..."

He darts behind me without another word and rummages through the pocket.

"How deep is this bag?" Jack mutters to himself. It feels like he's got his entire arm in the tiny front pocket.

"It's bottomless," I say, but I don't think he hears me. I guess I should have warned him about that earlier.

It takes a moment, but at long last he lets out an, “Ah-ha!” and shoves the vial into my sweaty, waiting hand.

I pull the cork stopper out and drink it down before I can wonder if it’s a good idea, if maybe Sir Arthur wasn’t on our side after all and decided to poison me instead. If it is poison, it does taste nice, like lemons and oranges.

When it’s gone, I slump against the ground and wait. It’s a slow process, but my head clears, my fingers and toes tingle, and a sudden desire to run and run and run overwhelms me.

“Wow,” I say as I sit up.

“Are you all right?” Jack asks.

“Fine,” I say as I flex my hands. “That worked great, actually.”

He quirks a brow at me. “What were you expecting?”

“No idea, really. But when you’re dealing with people like Sir Arthur, you should probably think twice about everything.”

“What was it?”

“A restorative type thing. Sir Arthur gave it to me in case I got tired.”

Jack hums. “Good thing, too. I don’t think I’d be able to carry you back up to the main footpath.”

“Audrey? Jack?”

We spin at the same time. Tabitha’s there, watching us curiously, leaning against the railing separating the path from the riverbank. She’s changed into clean clothes and rearranged her dark ponytail into a thick braid. Her hands are braced on her bag straps like she’s ready to leave, and she’s hopping back and forth on her feet like that moment can’t come fast enough. Her hands aren’t shaking anymore, and her eyes don’t have that wild look about them, but I still approach her slowly.

“Tabitha,” I say. “You came back.”

“Yeah.” She looks me up and down and wrinkles her nose. “You’re... you’re really wet. Both of you.”

“Yeah,” Jack says as he rubs a hand through his hair, making it stick up even more.

“We went to Paris. And Italy.”

She quirks a brow at me. “Any particular reason, little cousin?”

I swallow. “Just to see if I could. Are you... you can run really fast.”

She lets out a noise halfway between a sigh and a chuckle. “Yeah. That’s my... thing, I guess. Like how you can travel in the water, and Grandma’s ridiculously ancient. I can run. Kinda dumb, really, as far as... things go.”

I ignore her. “Where did you go?”

“I didn’t go far, really.” She wipes at her eyes. “Just... back into the city. I... I found the Door, and I was ready to go through it and everything but then I just...” She shakes her head. “I didn’t, as you can probably tell. So I went back, stole a cup of tea from some sap at one of the cafes — there are so many cafes here, it’s kind of weird — and I sat in the shade for a while and... yeah, I think I’m okay now.”

“Really?” I ask her. “Are you sure this time? Because I can’t... I literally can’t do this without you, Tabby.”

“I know. What I did was... it was wrong. I know that, and I’m really, really sorry I just left you and the kid without saying anything. That was... kind of awful of me.”

“It’s okay,” I say. I don’t know if it is or not, but I get the feeling Tabitha’s not in the mood to debate it now. “Are you ready, then?”

Tabitha stares at me for a long, silent moment before she vaults over the fence and slips her wand from her sleeve. She waves it in a graceful arc and says, “**Chorís Thermótita.**”

A cool tingle ripples down my spine and settles right at the base. When I breathe out, it puffs into a cloud as though it’s freezing, even though it’s got to be well over thirty degrees out.

I give my little nub a quick wipe over as Tabitha casts the spell again for Jack — who shudders so violently it looks like he might collapse — but considering what we’re about to do and where we’re going, it’s probably futile.

"I think that did it," Jack says, his teeth chattering.

"We shouldn't waste any more time," Tabitha mutters. She stands by my side and puts her wand away. Her cheeks are blotchy, but her jaw is set like she's made her decision. "I've got no idea how long that spell will last for."

I nod. It feels like there's a lump stuck in my throat when I swallow. "Then we better get moving. Take my hands."

Jack pulls his ski goggles over his eyes. Tabitha pulls her lips into a thin, no-nonsense line.

I suck in a deep breath and lead them both into the water. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER TEN

The water slips around us like a satin sheet, pulling us further and further down until there's no light left. I can feel the moment when the layers change, when the dark blanket of river water passes over us, turning to the lighter saltwater of the open ocean. The hum of magic roars in my ears, and all the strength falls out of me in one fell swoop. Jack and Tabitha gasp around their breathing tubes, sending up four thin, white funnels of bubbles to the surface. In a magical body of water, I don't know where the surface might be.

It's hot here. Hotter than anything I've probably ever imagined. The water tickles and bubbles against my skin like it's on a low simmer. Thanks to Tabitha's spell, though, it's pleasant, like a nice, warm bath. We could let go of our hands now, since the hard work is done, but Tabitha and Jack squeeze me even tighter, like they know I can hardly carry myself anymore.

If we weren't on a deadline, it'd be nice to slow down and take everything in. There are creatures here that I've never seen before. Coral and anemones in all kinds of crazy patterns, and every colour and shade in between of the rainbow. Octopuses with bulbous heads and tentacles so long they get tangled in the black, ghostly reeds that grow like weeds in the cracks of the rocks. Small, metallic-blue fish with massive heads and eyeballs. Great, spiny sea urchins the size of boulders. Footlong shellfish propelling themselves through the water with violent little spurts that leave behind great lines of foamy bubbles. Bright purple sea cucumbers laying on the rocks alongside huge, golden starfish. It's a whole other world, and I'm not sure if it's the magic of the lower layer, or their proximity to a volcano that's responsible.

The heat is beginning to make my skin feel tight. I can only imagine what it'd be like if the spell wasn't in place. My lungs are straining, too, but we're **so close**; I can feel the magic of the place echoing in my bones.

A massive rock sits on the seafloor with a steady stream of bubbles gurgling from its cave-like entrance. A dozen merpeople with vivid tails that flash like fire and white eyes drift along its periphery, but there's a pattern to their movements. Coordinated, almost, like they're guarding the entrance.

As we approach, they come to a dead halt, their golden eyes trained on us and their jagged teeth bared. My heart feels like it's going to pound right out of my chest as I pull Jack and Tabitha to a stop, but I don't know what we're going to do if they really want to fight.

But they don't engage.

I can't tell how long it takes, but the merpeople swim away with sharp slices of their tails through the water. Jack squeezes my hand and gives me a look that's half terrified, half awed.

**Nothing like the Tritons at all**, I try to tell him. I think he understands.

The water goes still, quiet, silent.

Maybe a little too silent.

The ocean floor rumbles. Through the roar of the magic, the stones on the ground crack and snap. In between the gaps, I swear I can see magma glowing a bright, dangerous red.

A massive squid, fifty metres long at least, emerges from the entrance. It's the biggest creature I've ever seen, watermelon-pink with slim tentacles that float around its mantle like hair.

And it's staring at us like we're dinner.

If I could scream, I would. Given how flooded my mouth is with hot, salty water, I think I might have tried. But Tabitha nods towards it, as though she wants to get closer. Jack and I share a look, but I don't think there's going to be any way around this; we'll have to make our way down there sooner or later.

With a flick, Tabitha slips her wand from her sleeve and grasps it in her hand. She gives another hard nod in the squid's direction, and together we drift down through the hot water towards it.

I'm not sure how one might go about defeating a giant squid, if we even need to **defeat** a squid at all. But we need to think of something quick.

It darts towards us, faster than those zippy shellfish we passed. Tabitha keeps a tight grip of my hand as she slices her wand through the water like she's brandishing a sword. The squid lashes out like a viper, but before it can hit us, a blinding burst of orange light erupts from Tabitha's wand.

The light fades like a sunset, in slow, decreasing ebbs. Once my eyes have readjusted, the squid is gone. So are the fish, the octopuses, the merpeople, and all the other creatures. Even the strange reeds at the lie flat to the seafloor.

But the path to the entry of the cave entrance, save for a steady stream of bubbles gurgling up, is clear now.

We exchange a glance. Tabitha shrugs, her hair escaping the braid and drifting around her head like a dark cloud. Jack wiggles his eyebrows under his ski goggles and nods towards the entrance.

We swim through the narrow entrance and follow it down a cavern so dark it's like swimming in ink. Tabitha and Jack are on either side of me, but there's no way to see them. I squeeze their hands again, and they squeeze back.

And then I headbutt a wall of stone.

If I could see anything at all in front of me, I know it would all be spinning in horrible, speedy circles. My head already feels like an out of control carousel, looping around and around and around...

Maybe that nap isn't such a bad idea...

But we're still moving forward, somehow. Upwards, I think, but that doesn't sound good. Dangerous, even. My prosthetic feels like a live thing in the water, dragging me down,

down, down. My arms are outstretched over my head, pulled so high my shoulders might dislocate, but we're still moving.

Somewhere, far off, there's a tiny speck of light shimmering down. Knowing our luck, it's a mutant, giant angler fish, waiting to eat us as soon as we make it to the end.

The longer I stare, the larger the speck gets. Fixed in place, flickering yellow-orange-red like flames. Whatever it is, it grows larger and larger until it takes up my whole vision for a bright, blinding second until, without even knowing it, we've breached the surface.

I drop Jack and Tabitha's hands and claw my way out onto an uneven stone floor. I suck in deep, gasping breaths as though the next one is my last.

We're in a cavern, lit by a dull, flickering light, lined with smooth, dark stone. Steam rises off the surface, making the air appear thicker than it is, but it fits, because the air here is the most disgusting thing I've ever had up my nose. Mouldy cheese, dead seaweed, and sulphur, all together and superheated. The rippling surface of the water casts strange patterns over the roof that don't look natural. If I look close enough, they almost look like faces...

The creepiest part, though? There's one way out (unless you want to make the swim again), through a tall, narrow entrance along the back of the wall.

The spell Tabitha cast is still in place; the base of my spine tingles as though I've been sitting in an ice bath. I decide to be grateful: if I weren't being kept cool from within, I would have fried by now.

"Are you guys all right?" My voice is all hoarse and scratchy like I've drank half the ocean. Which I probably did.

"I'm good, I think," Jack says, groaning. "My arms feel like they might drop off, though."

Tabitha coughs. "Yeah, I'm good, too. What about you, little cousin?"

"Yeah, 'm okay." I reach down to unhook my prosthetic, but the movement forward makes my head lurch and the room spin and spin and spin. I'm down there long enough to unlatch the thing and push it away before I make a gross, hacking noise like I'm about to vomit.



"Whoa, stop that." Tabitha says as she crawls to my side and eases me down to the floor. She shoves a wet jacket behind my head but it's too hot and gross for me to really appreciate the gesture. "Lie back, all right? Stay still for a bit."

That bump to my head must be worse than I thought. My stomach rolls like angry thunder clouds; those chips that Jack bought me are threatening to make a comeback. Maybe I should have saved that restorative for now. Pretty sure that's what Sir Arthur meant for me to do with it.

"Are you all right?" Tabitha asks. "I'm pretty sure you're not just tired."

"I, uh... I hit my head." I probe my head and find a tender, egg-sized bump right on top. "It got so dark. I went straight into the wall."

"You might be concussed or something," Jack asks.

I let out a weak laugh. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Well, I guess that explains why you went like a dead weight when we were climbing," Tabitha says with a tiny smile.

"You should lie still," Jack frets. "Don't move your head so much."

"I don't think I could if I tried." I tilt my head to the side in time to catch Jack looking at me like I might explode.

"Tabby..." I slur. "That bright flash back there... with the squid... what... what was that?"

"Sir Arthur's spell." Tabitha lets out a wet cough. "The second one he gave me. I had no idea what it was going to do... but wow, it came in handy."

Jack asks, "What do you think happened to the squid and all the other fish?"

"Probably sent them elsewhere. Sir Arthur might have been a bit weird, but I'm sure he's not out to murder sea creatures." Tabitha pauses and adds, "Pretty sure, at least."

"Also," Jack says. "Were those mermaids?"

I can't help it; I burst out laughing.

Tabitha grins. "Yeah. Not what you were expecting?"

Jack's face twists. "Not exactly."

"Well, what do we do now?" I ask. "It looks like there's a path leading further in over there."

"Calm down, explorer," Tabitha says, giving me a pointed look. "We're gonna sit tight until you feel better. Can't have you going in guns blazing just to fall over two seconds later."

"Hey!" I point at Tabitha with a weak, shaky finger. "I'd last at least five seconds and you know it."

"Still not very heroic, though, is it?" She sets a hand on my forehead and frowns. "I don't know if you're damp and feverish or if this cavern's making you sweaty."

A flash of red catches my eye. Before Tabitha can pull her hand away, I seize it in mine.

"Your... what happened to your hands?"

They're beat, covered in scratches and grazes and blood. I glance at Jack, and his are the same. My head feels light and dizzy all over again, but my stomach sinks like it's weighed down with stones.

Tabitha and Jack exchange a frown.

"Well, we had to climb up the rock wall," Jack shrugs, like their shredded hands are no big deal. "We couldn't swim up, and you were... you know. So, we... climbed. It's not like we had a choice."

"He's right, Audrey, as annoying as it is," Tabitha says before I can cut in. "We had to. You would have done the same if you were on the outside, too."

"And it's not as bad as it looks," Jack says as he examines his fingernails. "Stings a little, but it's all right."

"I'm still sorry," I say, staring at the strange patterns on the ceiling. Sometimes, if I squint, the face shapes stare right at me...

It's hypnotic, the way they swirl together and shimmer. My clothes dry, but I sweat through them all over again. I might be sweating more than before, more than...

"I think... I think that spell's starting to wear off," Jack pants.

"Yeah." My eyes drift closed. "I think it might be..."

Footsteps echo through the cavern. Tabitha and Jack are sprawled out on either side of me, unmoving.

The footsteps draw closer. My heart pounds but my brain doesn't care anymore. The ability to care must have sweat out of my skin, pooled on the ground and run off into the water.

The clinking footsteps are right behind us.

"Oh, good," a rattling voice says. "You've arrived."

### XXX

Wallace Poultrygeist is something out of a nightmare.

He's tall, spindly, and covered in skin so thin it sinks down into every crevice on his face. Wispy strands of hair clump together and look like old cobwebs over his head, but his eyes are as bright as they would have been a thousand years ago, piercingly green and bulging in his hollow sockets.

"Muffinstump. Meadowgreen. Bean." He smiles like a jack-o-lantern. "Thank you for joining me so promptly."

I try to sit up straight, but the room spins even more. "Where are our parents?"

Poultrygeist chuckles. "In due time, children. In due time."

"No," I say with far more authority than I feel, since I'm still sprawled out on the ground with my leg unattached. "Where are our parents?"

Poultrygeist sighs; the sound of it is like a whistling breeze through dead grass.

"They're safe for now. Or, at least, as safe as they can be."

He gestures a long hand at my prosthetic. "Please, reattach your leg. We have much to discuss."

**"My parents,"** I hiss.

"Mine, too," Tabitha slurs as she rolls onto her belly.

Jack's starting to move beside her.

"They are safe for the time being. That is all you need to know for now."

Poultrygeist glances between us like we're bugs about to meet our end under his boot.

"You look like you're about to expire." He clicks his bony fingers together and another icy blast washes over us, a hundred times more powerful than Tabitha's spell. Jack's teeth start chattering, Tabitha's next breath is a puff of steam. Goose-bumps bloom up and down my arms.

"Pardon the heat," he says, not sounding apologetic at all. "I don't thrive in much less these days, I'm sure you can understand."

He picks up my detached leg. He cradles it in his arms and, with another flick of his fingers, lifts me off the ground. He binds my arms tight to my sides and I can't move a thing as I float after him like a plank. My teeth clench, and I can hear my pulse speeding along my veins.

My voice shakes and ripples as I ask, "What... what are you going to do with me?"

He shakes his head, and it sounds like his neck is on a rusty hinge. "Nothing yet."

I almost laugh. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

Without turning around, he says, "Believe what you will, child, but if I had any desire to harm you or your friends, I would have done so already."

"Then why haven't you?"

"Because it is not in my best interests to harm you now."

I blink once, twice. "What **do** you want with me?"

He frowns at me like I'm the problem. "I've not had contact with children for millennia: do you all ask such frequent and asinine questions?"

Through gritted teeth, I say, "Only when we're being kidnapped."

"On that count, Miss Muffinstump, I must object. I never kidnapped you. You arrived here of your own free will."

The narrow, dark pathway opens into a much larger, better lit cavern, with a roof so high I can't make out the top of it. Pale, ghostly stalagmites grow up in thick mounds from

the ground and end in a shape like a rose. In the middle is a well of magma, bubbling and churning and spitting as though it could erupt and spill over at any moment.

On the far side of the cavern, there's a small niche with a door like a jail cell. The bars of it are bright, glowing gold, thrumming with so much power that the air around them distorts. Shadows move beyond the bars in tight little flickers, so quick I'd miss them if I blinked.

In there. My parents are in there.

Held in by magic, too. And not my magic, or my family's; there's no possible way for me, or Tabitha, to break it.

It needs to be him.

"What I require from you..." Poultrygeist says at last. He clicks his fingers again, and I drop to the ground. He tosses my prosthetic with a loud, worrying clunk and waits for me to put it back on. "I'm uncertain that it's something that could be explained in mere words. This is something which needs to be experienced." He gestures to a tall, almost invisible Door built into the stone wall, complete with a glint of tiny golden clover in the top corner.

He opens it and gestures for me to walk through it.

"Why would I go anywhere with you?"

He quirks a non-existent eyebrow at me. "Do whatever you will, Miss Muffinstump, but remember: you have much more to lose than I." He glances over to the barred door and shows off his dry, chipped teeth.

I ball my hands into fists so tight my nails bite into my palms and cut the skin. "You would kill them to make me help you?"

"What good would killing them do? Why would you help me? No, Miss Muffinstump, I won't kill your parents, or anyone else. But hurt them?" He stares at me as the bars on the door glow even brighter, brighter again until I have to shield my eyes. A quick, short scream echoes about the cavern, but only one.

"I have no qualms about hurting them, Miss Muffinstump, and I will if I have to," he hisses in my ear. "Step through the Door. I won't ask again."

I let out a trembling breath and glance back and Tabitha and Jack, standing by the entryway with their mouths agape. “Fine.”

“Audrey,” Tabitha warns.

“It’ll be all right, Tabby,” I tell her. “Check on them, all right?”

Poultrygeist’s answering grin is ghoulish and satisfied. I shiver as he sets a hand on my shoulder and leads me through.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

We step into a familiar city made of rubble and dust. A toppled building sits at the very top of the long, narrow street, surrounded by a field of clovers.

"This is the city I visited before, isn't it," I whisper. "The city where the earthquake happened, and the building collapsed. You were there, too, weren't you? Standing on top of the broken building, watching me."

"Who do you think lured you through this place, Miss Muffinstump?" he says as he ventures further. "It was no coincidence that you left your grandmother's home and arrived in this city when you did, or that your father's note reached you in the first place. I needed to be sure, that your abilities could match my needs."

I swallow. "My abilities?"

"We will get to that soon, my girl. We have much to discuss first." He spreads his hands and says, "Look around, Miss Muffinstump. Tell me: what do you see?"

"It's all ruins, like it's been empty forever."

"Not forever. Only a thousand years."

"That's as good as forever."

He scowls at me. "A thousand years passes in a blink when you're as long-lived as I am, ignorant girl.

"Stand here." He guides me to a spot that doesn't seem different from any other. "This is no ordinary city, Miss Muffinstump. You feel the thrum of it, don't you? Listen to it: what is it telling you?"

"This is **the** city," I say. "The one you destroyed."

"A miscalculation," he says with a wave of his hand. "One I could not have foreseen in my quest to re-establish our crumbling world from the **human realm**." He spits the words out

like they're dirty. "But it's more than that, Miss Muffinstump. Don't you feel the pleasant warmth of the place? The comfort and ease? This place was the biggest home for our people that the lower layer held. You belong here, Miss Muffinstump; we all do."

It's true: even though the desolate look of the place unsettles me, the atmosphere of it envelopes me like a hug from my mother. I scowl to myself; I feel slimy just thinking that.

"You understand, don't you?" he asks. "What must be done? Why should our kind be condemned to hiding in secrecy, tamping down our magics lest we let the secret out? Why must our cities continue to crumble while the human realm thrives? What kind of lives are we living, Audrey Muffinstump, and do you believe for one moment that it is worth it?"

"Your grandmother shared this vision, once," he goes on, quieter. "A remarkable woman, she was once. Powerful and determined enough to sit at my right hand, forever, if she wanted it."

"Don't talk about my grandma like that. She would never sit with you."

"Oh, but she would. And she did. Until her resolve wore too thin and she decided our purpose was flawed. Can you imagine the sheer lack of faith one must have in their own heritage to spit on it so readily? Mark my words, your grandmother was weak, Miss Muffinstump. Weak willed and weak minded."

"So, what then?" I say, my voice shaky. "What do you want from me?"

"I need your help, Miss Muffinstump."

A nasty, sinking feeling pools deep in my stomach and sits there like a lead weight. "With what?"

"We're rare sorts," he says, twisting his spindly arms behind his back. "Our abilities allow us to move unseen, invisible." He looks down at his tattered, scorched robes and smirks. "Well, mostly invisible."

"I cannot move through the flames as easily, or as often, as I used to," he goes on. "Irrksome little side effect of my age, I'm sure you'll understand."



"But you... you're small. Unassuming. Using water, even a small puddle of it, to cross vast distances is much less conspicuous than fire. Think of what you could do, of what we could accomplish together, if you were to assist me in accomplishing my goal?"

"How do you know about what I can do?"

"There are four Pathfinders in our world, my dear, not including myself, and I keep careful track of them all. I watched your every step when you were here. Where did you think a puddle came from in these ruins? This place has been dead so long even rain refuses to fall unless it's forced." He waves his hand, and a light drizzle falls around us.

After everything he's told me, I shouldn't be surprised. "You set it all up?"

"Down to the last speck of dust kicked up by your shoes. I had to be certain that you could be what I need, that right combination of curiosity, determination, and raw ability."

"You want me to steal for you, don't you?" I realise. "You want me to travel into the different magical family homes and steal their sources?"

Poultrygeist taps a gaunt finger against his chin. "Don't think of it as stealing. We're bringing them home, where they belong, to serve a far nobler purpose than gathering dust in attics. Magic is meant to be seen and heard. Tell me, dear girl, when was the last time you set eyes on your family's sceptre?"

I bite my lip. I've never been in the same room as the Muffinstump sceptre. Not the real one, anyway. That one was always locked away, out of sight, probably in case something like **this** ever happened.

"Such power, and all our families use it for now is posturing and decoration. How are you meant to understand your heritage if you cannot even feel it? You could feel it in that room before, couldn't you? The thrum of power from only a few families. Imagine what we could do with the magical objects of **all** the magical families. Isn't the flow of magic not the truest thing of all? Could you imagine what it might feel like if they were all in here? With someone who could appreciate their power instead of hiding it away like a secret shame?"

"I have five families here at the moment," he tells me. "You've no doubt felt the echoes of my previous attempts in the upper layer, with so little magic at my disposal. Explosions

rather than results. I need more, Miss Muffinstump. More, and our world will be put to rights. You will have your parents back, Miss Meadowgreen hers.” The rain gets heavier and heavier with every word he speaks. “It will be perfect again. Just perfect.”

“But there wouldn’t be an upper layer anymore, would there?” I realise, my voice quaking. “Humans would die. Millions upon billions of them.”

He narrows his eyes. “A small price to pay to atone for the loss of millions upon billions of magicians, don’t you think? Their world for ours, as it was before.”

“And, what then? If I helped you do this... travel around and get these... things...” I swallow back a throatful of bile. “You’ll just give me my parents back? Just like that?”

“Is that all? Just your parents?” Poultrygeist laughs. “So very sentimental, aren’t you? I could give you far more than that if you were to follow my instructions, my girl.” He grins, showing a row of chipped, yellow teeth. The stench of his breath is almost too much to take.

“Once I’ve accumulated **all** the objects, I’ll have enough power to restore our world, my body, and give you all the wealth and riches you could ever need or desire.” He ticks them off his dead fingers, one by one. “Money. Fame. Status. True immortality. All things will be within my grasp.”

He leans in again, and this time there’s no escaping his rancid breath. “I could even give you a leg.”

I choke on air. He’s not — he couldn’t —

“What?” I manage to get out, but my voice is a weak, feeble thing, and Poultrygeist jumps on it like a lion stalking its prey.

Poultrygeist’s thin lips split into another horrible smile. “I believe you heard me, dear girl. What else could I offer you as your reward, if not something you’ve wanted your whole life?”

**Have I?** I can’t lie, I’ve thought about it, more than I’d ever want to admit. If there’s so much magic to go around that can solve any problem, large or small, why not make a leg out of nothing for me? When I was little, it made me angry. If I had two flesh-and-bone legs, I’d be able to do all the other normal things kids do. I wouldn’t have to go to hospital every few

months to be fitted for new prosthetics and learn how to walk all over again. I wouldn't get stared at by other kids in the street. No one would ask me why I'm different, what happened, why I was born wrong. I'd be able to walk and run for as long as I wanted.

But would it be better?

I can't say for sure.

I open my mouth to say... something, but as soon as I do, Poultrygeist jerks as though he's been electrocuted.

"What is..." he starts, panting like he's run a marathon. His body shakes all over, like he's been dunked in ice water. "**What?** No! No! No!"

He hurls a fireball from his trembling hand, and it erupts on the ground like a small bomb, hot and fierce enough that the rain does nothing. He walks into the high flames and stays there, burning up, for what seems like an eternity before he vanishes. The fire disappears, leaving a patch of scorched earth.

I waste no time jumping into a shallow puddle. I fall right through it, with Poultrygeist's undersea volcano firm at the front of my mind. Somehow, it's the easiest journey I've made so far. I emerge to a complete frenzy of movement punctuated by colourful waves of magic and clashes like cymbals that threaten to deafen me. A steady stream of people, some I recognise, some I don't, swarm towards the open Door and dive right through it.

It's chaos like I've never experienced before.

But where is Poultrygeist?

"Audrey!"

I spin at the sound of my name. Tabitha rushes towards me, a wild grin on her face. Jack follows her, ashen-faced and wide-eyed.

"Where are my parents? Are they all right?" I ask before they can say anything. A rogue stalactite falls and splits the ground beside me.

"I sent them and my parents through already, don't worry. They're all going to Grandma's place."

"What happened?"

"I have no idea," Tabitha says, but her wide smile doesn't fade. "We were talking to everyone behind the bars, and I don't know what happened, but when Jack touched them, they... melted."

"Melted? What did you do?" I ask Jack in wonder.

"I have no idea!" Jack shakes his head so fast he blurs. "I... I touched the door of the cell thing, and it... I don't know... dissolved?"

"How is that even possible? You're not... you aren't magic!"

"No, but I don't think that's the most important thing right now."

"You're right: it's not." Tabitha grabs our hands and drags us to the Door, where the last few magicians are filing in. "We've got to get out of here. This place is going to collapse any second now."

The floor rumbles, and the magma pit at the room's centre roils and churns. The cavern empties until there's nothing but Poultrygeist left, lying prone on the stone floor. Without the magic in the air, he's drained, as good as dead. Unable to follow us through the Door.

For now, anyway.

"Don't think I won't try again, girl," he wheezes. His eyes glow like acid as he stares after me, while his cavern falls around him. "Don't think this is over."

"It's over enough for now." I follow Jack and Tabitha through the Door and slam it shut behind me.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I land in the middle of Grandma's living room. Considering that there's maybe thirty people in the one small room, it's a wonder I managed to find any spare floor at all. There's not enough time to blink before three people gasp my name and two of them accost me right there on the floor, wrapping me in the warmest hug I've felt in months. Grandma watches with a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Mum, Dad," I whisper.

"Audrey." Mum lets out a low, rattling breath and nuzzles into my hair. She still smells the same, like lavender and oranges, just a little more... singed. "Audrey, you silly, brilliant girl."

"Absolutely brilliant," Dad agrees. He's the same, but with a few more whiskers scratching his chin. "Oh, Audrey, darling, you did wonderfully."

"We'll be having a talk later, just you and me," Grandma says with a wink. "You gave me a heart attack, you know?"

I cringe. "I'm... uh, sorry?"

"No, you're not." Grandma smiles again, but it's still not quite real. "And neither am I. You did well, Audrey. I'm... I'm proud of you."

I nod as my parents squeeze me tighter. I'm going to get ripped into later; I might as well enjoy myself now. "Thank you, Grandma." She smiles that weird half-smile again and moves off into the small crowd.

"Don't think you're going to get off so easily with me, young lady," Mum says with a grin. "What you did... Audrey, it all could have gone so wrong. And did you even care for your leg properly when you were out there, doing who knows what?"

"I took wipes and washed it whenever I could." I'm not going to mention that my socks are now full of holes, or that the best wash they've gotten so far is in seawater. "Promise."

"We're going to have a talk, too," Dad says. Mum nods against my hair. "We want to hear about everything you accomplished, everything you, your cousin, and that strange boy went through."

"Did either of you know that I'm a Pathfinder?" I ask, because there's no way I'm going to have the **boy** conversation right now.

Mum sighs. "Yes," she admits. "I saw it once, years ago, before you were even born. You were slipping through the water like a dolphin and ending up in all sorts of places."

"Why do you think we pushed so hard for your swimming lessons?" Dad says, winking.

Mum wipes her eyes and smiles a watery smile. "I am so, so proud of you, Audrey. It can't have been easy, but you did it."

"But did it make a difference?" I whisper. "We got you all out, sure, but Poultrygeist said he'd try again. When we were leaving, he told me he'd try again. Can he do that? Is it possible?"

Dad sighs into my hair. "It is," he confirms. "As many times as it'll take, he'll try again."

"But how?"

"He's resourceful, and he's not alone in his thinking. There are plenty out there who will be willing to help him see it all through."

"He said he could give me a leg if I helped him."

My parents go quiet for a moment.

"Audrey," Dad starts, "is that something you would want?"

"I don't know. I mean, I don't want to help him, but if someone offered me a leg... I don't know. Is that a bad thing?"

He kisses the top of my head and holds me even tighter. "I don't think it's a bad thing to wonder," he tells me. "And I think it's a wonderful thing to have a daughter as smart and mature as you."

"For now, though," he says as he pulls away. "I think I'd really like a shower."

“And you should take your friend home,” Mum says with a smile I’ve missed more than almost anything. “Before your grandma starts really interrogating him.”

I glance to where Grandma has Jack cornered like a frightened animal. “He’s just a kid that followed us by accident.”

“And he’s a kid who broke Poultrygeist’s cage. No mean feat for even the most powerful magicians. Your grandma’s going to have questions.” She smiles. “Getting him out of here now will be the best reward.”

“But you... we just got back.”

“And we’ll still be here when you get back,” Dad says. “Go save your friend.”

### XXX

Tabitha doesn’t need much convincing to escape the party and take Jack home.

“Home isn’t Switzerland, is it?” she asks, her hand poised at the Door. “You said you were there on holiday.”

Jack shakes his head. “I’m from Wales.”

“But your parents are still in Switzerland, yeah?”

“Who knows?” Jack shrugs.

Tabitha and I exchange a glance.

“They would be... looking for you, right?” Tabitha asks.

“Maybe? My parents are a little... well, let’s just say that they’re nothing like your parents.”

“I’m... sorry?” I say, but the sentence goes up at the end like I’m asking a question.

Jack rolls his eyes. “Don’t be. They’re a little... distant, I guess, but I’m still lucky. Come on,” he says. “I’ll picture my house for you, okay?”

The step through the bright electric blue of the Door and land on a quiet, jewel-green hilltop. A gentle breeze rustles the tall blades of grass, and somewhere down below, a creek gurgles. A massive stone building, like something out of the Middle Ages, reaches huge,

pointed parapets into the sky. It's pockmarked with holes and dents like it was a stronghold during battles, with random bricks missing from the walls. The Welsh flag ripples in the gentle breeze from one of the tall turrets and makes the dragon on it look like its running.

"Well, here we are." Jack sighs. "Home, sweet home."

I squeak. "You live in a **castle**?"

Jack scoffs. "It's a house made of stone, Audrey, it's not a castle."

"Uh, kid?" Tabitha says with an incredulous laugh. "It's definitely a castle."

He rolls his eyes. "Whatever. Come in for a bit?"

Jack sets off for his front door without waiting for us. He finds a key tucked under one of the many large stones clustered around the entryway and opens the old-fashioned door. It creaks as he pushes it, and the entryway beyond it has its own sound, like all the families who lived here before are still there as shadowy echoes.

"Wow," Tabitha says in awe. Her voice reverberates off the high, stone walls. "This is crazy!"

Jack snorts and closes the door behind them. "No, it's not."

"Your house is huge!"

"You live on top of an avalanching mountain. Audrey lives **inside** a mountain."

"Not something you can compare, kid. You live in a castle!" Tabitha skips off down the wide hall, her incredulous laughter creeping back at them.

A dark, faded red runner skims along the floor from the entryway and along the corridor to a point I can't see. Bright, glossy green plants dot their way along it, trying hard to make the place look welcoming. It's not working very well.

"Well, I'm sorry we dragged you through all that," I say. "Maybe Tabitha was right when we were in Melbourne. Maybe we should've tried to find your family."

"I'm always right!" Tabitha calls back.

"Don't worry about it." Jack shakes his head. "With you and Tabitha, I had the most fun in... well, ever."

I smirk at him. "Yeah, well, I kind of have to disagree with you there."



Jack laughs. "I guess you would."

"But... I guess I'm not mad about you following us."

"You'd still be in that volcano if I hadn't." I might laugh if that wasn't so true. "And besides, **you're** the ones who wouldn't take me back. If anything, you guys kidnapped me."

"Didn't see you minding."

He glances around his castle and shrugs. "Guess not."

We shuffle around some more. Was it always this awkward?

He laughs. "You really want to ask, don't you?"

"Ask what?"

"How it happened. How I got everyone out of there."

"I am curious," I admit. "So is everyone, though."

"Me, too, but it doesn't seem like there's anything to talk about. I touched the bars of the cell, and they disappeared. I asked your grandma — or, I guess she asked me — but she wasn't sure what might have happened, either." He shrugs again and smiles. "I guess I can live not knowing."

I snort. "That's a giant lie."

"Yeah. It definitely is."

"Have you been able to do anything else?"

"Nothing," he says with a smile. "Not that I mind. This whole magic thing's been exhausting. I'm going to sleep for a week now."

I laugh. "Me, too, I think."

"Hey, you want a snack before you go?" Jack asks, turning towards what Audrey can only guess is the kitchen. "I don't know about you, but I'm ridiculously hungry. And thirsty."

"It feels like forever since we ate," I say wistfully.

"Forever," Jack agrees. "Come on, there's chips and stuff in the kitchen."

I follow Jack down a long corridor, with tall, wooden doors running along either side at even intervals. Empty sconces for torches sit empty in between each door. What might the corridor look like if all the torches were lit? Would shadows stretch out onto either side of the

wall, in front of and behind you like they were following or surrounding you? I glance back and suppresses a shudder. Creepy.

But something else catches my eye. A glint of something at the top of one of the doors. It's faded, but there, sparkling when the light hits it right. It can't be, though... it shouldn't exist in a human house.

"Uh, Jack?" I call, my voice shaking.

"Yeah?"

I point to the tiny, faded clover at the very top of the door. "Why is there a Door in your house?"

TO BE CONTINUED