

“Get up!”

Evan sprang upright, his book and flashlight falling to the floor with a thud. “What?” He rubbed his eyes, searching for the owner of the voice. Was it a voice? He couldn’t be sure. The room was dark. Eerie shadows moved around him, shadows of the tree branches in the yard shifting under the full moon.

“Hurry!”

Yes, a voice—soft, whispery, yet loud at the same time—filling his whole head.

“Come!”

A shadow darted across the room. Not the tree branch shadow, but a creature sort of shadow. A raccoon? A cat? No, too big for that. But too small for a person. The shadow jumped into the windowsill. In the moonlight Evan could make out a flowing garment, like a robe. A purple robe. The shadow creature turned away, revealing a glowing symbol on its back—Evan’s mouth opened and closed involuntarily.

The symbol was the same one that was on the cover of his book. The book about Ahoratos.

Who are you? he wanted to ask. But no words came out of his mouth. It wouldn’t open at all now. He just stared. The creature’s head swiveled around, but Evan could not make out a face in the hood—as if the hood were actually empty.

“Hurry! Before it’s too late!”

“Too late . . .” Evan’s words started working but each one seemed to take forever to come out. “For . . . what?”

Suddenly the bedroom door burst open, and Xavier stomped in.

“Evan, there was this thing in my room—”

Evan’s eyes flicked to his brother, who wore a wide-eyed expression. He turned back to the creature sitting in the window. So he sees it too. I’m not imagining it. Very slowly, Evan lifted his arm until his finger pointed directly to the silhouette of the thing sitting on the sill.

He heard Xavier gasp. “What . . . is . . . it . . . ?” He was having the same trouble with words that Evan had.

The creature spoke impatiently. *“Prince Evan, Prince Xavier. Follow me! Quickly!”* And then it disappeared out the window. The second-floor window.

Evan glanced at his brother’s frozen face. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. Maybe they both had. But Evan didn’t think so. He was suddenly filled with curiosity. He had to know what that creature was and what the big hurry was all about.

Evan jumped out of bed and headed for the windowsill.

“Wait! What are you doing?” Xavier hissed at him.

“He said we had to go with him!” Evan replied. The curtains of the window blew riotously, as if a storm were brewing outside. Evan looked out, scanning the darkness. The creature was nowhere to be seen. But there was something else—something glowing in the night air. There it was again! The same symbol from the

book. It was huge, transparent yet somehow solid, shimmering as it spun slowly, suspended in space.

He heard the voice again. “*Come!*”

“Evan, you can’t jump—you’ll break your legs!” Xavier had come up beside him. He saw it too—the weird glowing object hovering in the air. “What is . . . ?” His voice trailed off.

Maybe it’s a dream, Evan thought. It had to be. In which case, what harm could it do to follow the shadow creature and see what would happen next?

“Let’s go!” Evan said.

“Wait!” Xavier nearly shouted. But Evan ignored him. It was only a dream. He jumped.

Evan only dropped down a few inches before his feet hit the ground. Weird. Then his feet started sinking into thick black muck. Mud maybe. But different. Sticky. More like . . . cake batter. He turned around to face the window he’d just jumped out of, but it wasn’t there anymore. The whole house was gone. He looked up. Above him the sky was bright—red. Not a peaceful, sunset red. It was a bright, fiery red. Like the sun had bled its colors all over the universe. He looked to his right and left. All around him stood tall trees with large black leaves, so close together there didn’t seem to be any light between them. The trees were growing—getting taller as he watched, thicker, sprouting black leaves, blocking out the red sky. They encircled him, like giant, hideous soldiers, closing in. He was completely surrounded.

He heard a squishy, goopy sound and turned to see his brother standing in the cake batter next to him. Evan was surprised to see fear in Xavier’s wide eyes. He’d always thought Xavier wasn’t afraid of anything.

They looked at each other, but neither spoke, all their combined emotions muddling together and making it hard to know what to think or do. The silence, for that brief moment, was deafening.

Then the purple-robed creature appeared before them, making them both nearly jump out of their skins.

“*Follow me!*” The creature plunged into the circle of thickening trees, its gait a sort of waddling glide, half-leaping, half-running, like a turkey trying to fly. As it went, the leaves of the trees changed from black to vivid purple, dripping like fresh paint as if they had been stained by the creature’s robe.

“We need to go that way,” Evan said, indicating the purple leaves.

“But how? There’s no path or anything.”

This was true. Around them the huge black trees loomed, growing ever taller. The little splash of purple leaves seemed like their only hope.

“It said to follow. That’s where it went. So, let’s go!” Evan used all his strength to make his feet work, pulling them out of the cake batter-y muck to take a step forward. It wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be. He took another step, heading for the splotch of purple in the dense wall of trees. He noticed the purple leaves beginning to tremble, as if stirred by a sudden wind. But as he got closer he

realized they were actually *parting*, revealing a narrow pathway marked by more purple leaves. The creature appeared at the end of the purple trail, glowing as if from its own inner light, still moving quickly and yet somehow never quite out of sight.

Evan turned to Xavier. "Let's go! This way!"

"Coming!"

The two boys started to run toward the purple path, Evan leading the way for once. It was like running in molasses, like one of those dreams where someone is chasing you but you can't seem to get away. But once they started, it became easier. They found as they picked up speed their feet didn't sink anymore, like they were running on top of the mud, feeling the wet splashes up their pajama pant legs. Before them the purple leaves trembled and parted, leaning away from the path as if to welcome them and give them room to pass through. Evan thought they were actually waving to him, calling out: *This way, this way*. Up ahead, just barely visible, the little guy in the purple robe continued to zigzag through the trees, drenching the leaves in purpleness as he went, opening up the path for them to follow.

"Hey, wait up!" said Xavier. He was having trouble keeping up with Evan, which was definitely a new thing. Evan found he was starting to like this dream a tiny bit.

Then a loud rumble sounded overhead, stopping Evan in his tracks. *Was that thunder?* But the rumble didn't stop. It grew and grew, making the huge black trees around them quake as if with fear. Evan looked up at the sky, which was changing from bright red to purple-black, like a bad bruise.

Xavier caught up, panting. "What was that?" Evan didn't answer. He was too scared to speak. They heard a loud crack, and then a tree right next to them split open, its edges glowing red like embers from a roaring fire.

"Lightning!" Xavier said. But not normal lightning. This lightning was way too close—as if it was aiming straight for *them*. Another crack, and another nearby tree split and shriveled, burned to a crisp in an instant.

"Watch out!" Xavier cried. They dodged out of the way as the blackened tree began to topple over, crashing to the ground in a shower of sparks. Evan felt his courage evaporate. If this was a dream, it was getting way too scary: the deadly lightning, the falling trees, the growing rumble that seemed to shake the forest to its roots, the ominous blackening of the sky. Evan wanted to wake up now.

He felt his brother's hand on his shoulder. "Let's keep going," Xavier said, as if knowing what Evan was thinking. "Just . . . don't look back, whatever you do."

Evan nodded, fighting back tears. He wouldn't let Xavier see that, that's for sure. He looked toward the purple leaves, the trail that seemed to be their only way forward. The darkness was closing in around them. Evan heard the creature's voice in his head. Kind of like his own, but different somehow. Deeper. More certain of itself. *Stay on the trail. Don't look back*, it said. So Evan didn't.

Xavier could just make out the little creature in the robe, darting this way and that, drenching the leaves of the trees in brilliant purple as it went. How did it move so fast? Xavier couldn't even tell if it had legs.

He kept checking to make sure Evan was still with him—he couldn't lose his brother. Mom would kill him.

Mom. Dad. Where were they? What was this world he and his brother had jumped into? He glanced up at the purple-red sky, which seemed to be moving, swirling almost, like a storm gathering. A bad one. All around him trees were splitting open, glowing red and then shriveling, falling, and sending up billows of ashes. Charred, smoldering branches rained down on either side of them, so close Xavier could feel the hot embers prickling his skin. He swatted at them as if they were alive, like swarming mosquitos. Maybe Evan was right—maybe this really was a dream and nothing bad could happen to them. Maybe. But Xavier had never felt a shivering in his soul like this in any other dream before.

He heard a high-pitched yelp and turned to see Evan trapped beneath a fallen tree branch. Above him, the rest of the seared tree was creaking and popping as it started to tip over. Xavier ran back to Evan, who was clawing the thick muck to free himself.

"I'm stuck!" Evan cried, panicking now as the falling tree loomed over them. Xavier lifted the branch and grabbed hold of his brother, ripping the bottom of Evan's pant leg as he pulled him up. The boys scrambled away just as the tree crashed behind them in a fountain of glowing ash.

"Ouch!" Evan wiped some ash off his arm where it burned his skin a little.

"You okay?" Xavier asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

Xavier tried to look at Evan's arm, but his brother pulled away roughly.

Don't stop! The voice again, in their heads, bouncing off the trees. Xavier and Evan lurched once more toward the purple path. Behind them the falling trees made hideous noises, like agonizing screams. *Do trees feel pain?* Xavier wondered. It sounded to him like the whole world was crying out in terror and fear, the darkness closing in on them.

Where are we going? When are we going to get there? Will this ever end? he wondered.

And then suddenly it did. The trail opened to a large body of water, its still surface reflecting the blotched red and purple sky. The water seemed to have no end—as big as an ocean, stretching to the stormy horizon. It was eerily calm in contrast to the backdrop of crashing trees and crackling lightning, the ever-growing rumble like an earthquake gathering under their feet. The water didn't move, not even a ripple.

"Whoa," said Evan. He was panting, his hands on his knees. He glanced behind him, poised to bolt if necessary. "Where do we go now?"

Xavier had no answer. It seemed as though they were trapped between the black trees and the tranquil water—there was nowhere else *to* go.

“Follow me!”

Both boys jumped, turning their attention to the lake. There, hovering over the mirrorlike surface of the water, was the purple-robed creature. *“Into the Water!”* the voice boomed, nearly drowning out the sounds of chaos behind them. Then the creature just—disappeared, like it was sucked right into the water.

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