

*RIIIINNNG! Finally, I thought, there's almost nothing more boring than waiting for other people to finish a test, especially when it was that easy.* I gathered my things and headed over to my locker to grab my books for English. I opened my locker and as I grabbed one of the books I barely noticed the small object that fell from the pages. I bent down and picked it up. It was a tiny golden key with the words *just a dream?* engraved on its handle. It was about the length of my thumb, including my short fingernail. It was a mysterious object, but not as much a mystery as what it might unlock. I flipped through the pages of the book that the key had fallen out of, but I didn't find anything else in there, or in any of my other books, for that matter. I stood there for a while, just thinking. The key was too small to fit in a classroom door or the keyholes in the lockers for jammed lockers and forgotten number combinations. Almost as soon as I had that thought I got an idea. Maybe it did open a locker, just a different part of it! I felt around the back wall of my locker, stopping when I felt some ridges in the dented metal. I looked more closely at the spot where my hand was lingering, and just as I'd hoped, I saw a tiny keyhole. I inserted the key, it was a perfect fit! I turned the key and the whole back wall of my locker popped open like the door of a safe, but big enough to fit through. I couldn't see what was on the other side, but since I never really understood why curiosity killed the cat, I made sure no one was watching and I stepped through it. It was already too late when I realized that I was going to be late for class.

I studied my surroundings, amazed at what I saw. It appeared that I was in some kind of forest, but the trunks of all the trees were pure white and the leaves were either bronze silver or gold. I looked over my shoulder but I couldn't find any trace of where I had come from. I went over to one of the bronze trees and climbed it to get a better view of my surroundings. All I saw was more trees, miles and miles of trees. I sat in that tree for a while, wondering how I would get home, not that I was in a rush. Then I noticed large bronze disks hanging from the tree. I looked closer and realized that they were large coins. I picked one off the tree and studied it more closely. A creature that looked like a rabbit with a long lemur-like tail was engraved in the coin. I put the coin in my pocket and climbed down from the tree. I climbed up a silver tree and, just as

I suspected, I saw coins growing on that tree too, but they were silver, of course. I picked one from the tree, and this one had a chubby little bird with cat ears engraved on it. I pocked it and climbed up a golden tree. Once again I plucked a coin from the tree, and this one had a bold lion with beautiful feathered wings. I put the coin in my pocket and jumped down from the tree. It



was then that I saw the most magnificent creature that ever existed appear in a tiny clearing about a hundred yards away. It was even more beautiful than it looked like on the coin. It was a huge muscular lion with broad, white, feathered wings, its eyes fierce but kind. I don't know how long I stood there in awe, staring at its golden mane and proud posture. After a while I saw a boy who looked about my age walk over to the lion and stand by it. He spotted me and waved me over. He seemed friendly and I didn't have anywhere else to go, so I walked over to him and the lion.

"You need a ride?" the boy offered, "We don't charge much."

"You mean...on him?" I asked, looking over at the lion.

"Of course! Do I look like I have wings to you?" he laughed, "I'm Espen, by the way."

"I'm Isabelle" I replied.

"Hi Isabelle. This is my friend Quinto." He said, gesturing to the lion.

"Hi Quinto" I said, not actually expecting him to reply, so I was taken aback when he did.

"Hello Isabelle" he answered. His voice was strong and deep, like you'd imagine a lion's voice would be if it could talk.

I must've looked pretty bewildered because he gave me a funny look and asked "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a talking animal before?" I blushed deeply.

"I actually haven't. Besides humans, anyway." I explained, "I'm not exactly from around here"

"Really? Where are you from?" Espen asked.

"Ann Arbor" I answered.

"Hmm...never heard of it." Espen replied. I didn't expect that he would've. "So, do you want a ride?" he asked.

"Sure." I answered as I pulled the bronze coin out of my pocket, "is this enough?"



Espen's eyes brightened, but then he blushed. "I don't think we have enough change for that." He said.

"Change?" I asked, confused, "How valuable could this be, it grew on a tree, and there is plenty more!?"

Espen gave me a strange look and then muttered "Ann Arbor must be really far from here."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" I asked. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to feel offended, but the conversation was starting to make me feel pretty dumb.

"Well," he replied coolly, "the coins that grow on the trees only reveal themselves to certain people, people who are brave, wise, kind, you get the idea. The noble type."

Quinto nodded in agreement. "They are really hard to come by" he added. I wasn't sure if he meant the coins or the people. Perhaps he meant both.

"Are you sure those aren't just tales to keep people away?" I asked.

"Trust me on this, I've tested it." Espen replied.

"But I picked this one off one of the trees, and I'm hardly the noble type." I answered.

"Wait... you picked that off one of the trees?!" Espen exclaimed.

"Well, yes...but it must've been a mistake. I don't deserve this." I sighed looking down at the beautiful coin.

"The trees are never mistaken" Quinto said firmly, but not unkindly. After we all stood there silently and awkwardly for a while, Espen whispered something into Quinto's ear and they both nodded.

"Our village has a very serious problem." Espen explained "We think you can help."

"Why me? What makes you think I can help?" I asked doubtfully.



Espen gave a short laugh and said “You really are too modest. Like Quinto said, the trees are never mistaken. It’s very rare that they deem someone worthy to pick there coins.” Their eyes were pleading, I had to at least see I could help.

“Well... I guess I’ll see what the problem is” I said. Espen climbed upon Quinto and gestured for me to do the same. I hopped on behind him, so anxious I could barely keep myself contained. Espen laced his fingers tightly into Quinto’s mane.

“Hold on!” he instructed, and with that Quinto took off. I flung my arms around Espen’s waist as I nearly fell off.

Espen laughed. “I told you to hold on!” he called. We soared higher and higher, leaving the trees far below us. The wind rushed at my face, Quinto making perfectly smooth dips and turns. It felt even better than I imagined flying would feel like. The metallic trees below looked like a huge mound of pirates’ treasure, and on the horizon I could see a single peak, towering above the trees and slicing through the clouds.

As we drew closer to the mountain I began to notice more details. There was a river at the base of the mountain, not appearing to have any source or destination. It just circled around the mountain continuously. My science teacher would never believe me if I told him that I saw a river that didn’t travel downhill, didn’t have a source, and didn’t drain into a bigger body of water.

In the face of the mountain, on the other side of the river, was a dark cave. I couldn’t tell how big it was or if there was anything in it from where I was, but I had a feeling that I would be finding out really soon.

We landed on the bank of the river, across from the mountain. Standing not too far away was a young man dressed in tan pants, a night blue shirt, and a long brown cloak. He had messy brown hair and a short beard, and he looked about twenty years old. Strapped to his waist was a sword, its steel hilt gleaming in the sunlight. When he saw us he hurried over.

“Espen! Great to see you, little brother!” The man said as we climbed off of Quinto’s back.

“Hi Alez” Espen replied.



“Who’s your friend?” Alez asked looking over at me.

“This is Isabelle.” Espen answered, “I think she can help us.”

Alez looked me up and down and asked “What makes you say that?” His voice sounded slightly doubtful.

“She picked a coin off a tree.” Espen claimed.

“Did you see her do this?” Alez questioned.

“I don’t think she’s lying.” Espen said, sounding a little defensive, “She’s from some faraway place called Ann Arbor, and she had no idea how much the coins are worth. In fact, she even tried to pay Quinto and me for a ride with one. Besides, she’s completely modest.”

“Alright then, I guess we’ll let her try.” Alez replied. “Did you tell her what our problem is yet?”

“No, I think you should. I’m terrible at explaining things.” Espen answered. Alez turned to me.

“There is a beast stealing our food, livestock, and even people. It lives in that cave.” Alez began, pointing to the cave in the mountain, “It looks kind of like Quinto, but without the mane, wings, and tuff at the end of his tail. It’s an orange-ish color with black stripes, and it has long, red, poisonous spikes sticking out all the way down its spine. It appears to love golden objects, and it flinches slightly at the sight of silver ones. It is swift and strong, and everyone who has attempted to slay it, so far, came back badly injured or didn’t come back at all.”

“And you want me to kill it?” I asked, starting to feel nauseous.

“Yes.” Alez replied. *I can’t do this! I’m just a normal girl!* My mind screamed at me, but I knew that I needed to try. Espen believed that I could do it, and maybe, just maybe, Quinto was right about the trees never being wrong.

“I’ll try.” I said, trying to sound brave.

“First you’ll have to cross the river, though.” Alez explained, “The only way across is by wading through it. We tried to build a bridge across but the river swept it away. It’s too shallow for a



boat, unless maybe a row boat, but that would be easily swept away by the river too. You can't fly across because there's not enough room to land. You can't..."

"Okay, I get the idea. The only to get across is by wading." I interrupted.

"Sorry, it's just that people always ask 'couldn't you do this' or 'couldn't you do that'. It gets annoying after a while." Alez explained.

"Oh." I replied, "Well, I should get started then."

Alez handed me his sword. "Good luck." He said. It was probably the most serious and solemn 'Good luck' I'd ever received. I strapped the sword to my waist.

"Good luck." Espen echoed. I walked over to the river and studied it. It was moving very fast, as if it was a film that had been sped up. It looked to be about ten meters across.

I stepped into the river and instantly felt the strength of it, as if it wanted to knock me off my feet, and tear me away from the ground. Not to mention that it was also freezing cold. I was barely a few feet from the shore and the water was already almost up to my waist. I trudged on slowly, trying to keep my feet firmly on the ground beneath the water.

I was almost half way across the river, the water up to my chest and the current slamming into me, when I finally lost my balance. The river swept me away, and I struggled to keep my head above water and my mind clear. I think I heard Espen shouting my name, but it was almost impossible to hear anything over the sound of the rushing water and the pounding of my heart.

*Concentrate! Don't Panic!* I instructed myself. I ripped the sword Alez had given me from the strap around my waist and plunged the blade half way into the riverbed. I grasped the sword with a death grip until my feet were back on the ground and my mind was clearer. I took a few steps forward, still gripping the sword, and then ripped the sword out of the riverbed, sticking it back in a little closer to shore and the mountain. Then I took a few more steps, repeating this over and over until I reached the shore.

I dragged myself onto the river bank, which was literally about a foot wide. I inched my way along the small strip of land between the mountain and the river to the cave. I finally got to the cave, anxious and soaking wet. I put on my brave face and stepped into the cave.



The cave turned out to be a tunnel, and at the end was a huge cavern, lit only by the sunlight from outside and a pair of glowing yellow eyes.

“Are you here to kill me?” asked a voice so low that it caused multiple shivers to run up and down my spine.

“If I have to.” I answered, trying to keep my voice from shaking. The owner of the glowing eyes and terrifying voice stepped into the light coming through the tunnel so I could see it more clearly. It looked exactly like how Alez had described it, but to put it more simply, it looked like a large muscular tiger with red spikes sticking out all the way down its spine.

“If someone’s going to die, it’s not going to be me.” It said, laughing unimaginably wickedly.

“Don’t be so sure.” I replied, hiding my fear.

What happened next was so fast I didn’t have time to think about what I was doing. The creature lunged at me, teeth bared. I dove out of the way, the monster’s claw snagging on my arm before I landed, leaving a huge gash that went from my shoulder to half way to my elbow. I quickly got and dashed into the shadows, ignoring the pain. Before the beast spotted me I snuck up behind it and swung Alez’s sword down onto its tail. The tiger spun around and snarled, opening its jaws like a clam, but revealing razor-sharp teeth instead of shiny white pearls. Just then I remembered what Alez had said about the cat’s reaction to silver, and I got an idea.

“Ooooh, I’m sooo scared.” I taunted, “You sound like a mouse getting stepped on!” Just as I’d hoped, the tiger roared, opening its jaws even wider.

“Ha! You’re no real beast! Even my grandmother is scarier than you!” I provoked. The monster roared so loud I thought my eardrums would burst, and its mouth was open so wide that you could probably fit not one, but two heads in it. I snatched the silver coin out of my pocket and hurled it at the monster’s open jaws faster than the speed of light. My aim was dead on. The silver coin seemed to be lodged in the cat’s throat, for it began wheezing. Then it started gagging silently as if it couldn’t breathe at all. The beast’s legs began to weaken and wobble, and it finally collapsed to the ground, its eyes rolling back in its head.



It didn't appear to be breathing, but I drove my sword into its chest just in case. I began pushing, shoving, and dragging the beast until I got it to the end of the tunnel. I laid the lifeless monster out in front of the cave, so everyone would know the beast had been slain.

I looked up to the sound of applause and cheers, coming from a large crowd that had gathered on the other side of the river. I laughed to myself, imagining Espen or Alez going around telling people that a girl from the far of land of Ann Arbor was going to slay the mighty beast.

I trudged through the river once again, this time without encountering any problems. When I arrived at the shore everyone in the crowd got down on one knee and bowed their head. I told them that there was no need for any of that, and that I was just a regular person who wanted to help. I mingled with some of the people in the crowd, who were all from the village. They thanked me and asked me what had happened while I was in the cave. Even though I was bruised, bloody, and soaking wet, I was smiling so much my face got tired. It made me so happy to have helped these people, while having an adventure at the same time.

I spotted Alez and Espen, so I walked over to them. I held the sword out to Alez, but he hesitated.

"You can keep it, if you want." Alez offered. I laughed.

"We don't really need swords where I come from. I not exactly allowed to use one even. Alez looked a bit confused, but he shrugged and took the sword back anyways. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bronze coin, tossing it to Espen.

"Thanks for the ride." I said, "You can keep the change."

"Are you going to stay awhile? We'd be happy to supply food and a place to sleep, and I can show you around." He asked.

"That sounds wonderful, but I really need to find out how to get home." I replied. As soon as those words left my mouth everything around me began to blur and fade. A voice was calling my name.

"Isabelle, wake up! Math class is over!" It said. I opened my eyes and regained my bearings. I was in my math class which was mostly empty now. Standing in front of me was my friend Ana,



telling me that we'd be late for English. I checked myself and found that I was clean and dry, and I had no cuts or bruises. Somehow this made me disappointed.

I got up and followed Ana to English, feeling embarrassed that I'd fallen asleep in class. I carried on with the rest of my day feeling disappointed and saddened that my adventure had been just a dream.

Later that day, after I'd finished all my homework, I sat down to read a book, and I noticed an uncomfortable lump in my pocket. I pulled out an object and a smile stretched across my face. In my hand sat a large golden coin with a bold lion that had broad feathered wings engraved on it.