The night was cold and dead, and so felt Clarence’s heart. He dashed through the darkness, never stopping, always watchful for the men—every passing car making him leap back into the shadows of the trees lining the abandoned rural highway. His form was hardly more than a shadow, sweating even in the cold, his face bruised and scarred. With every second that passed, he knew they were coming; and with every step, he knew they were gaining on him.

He darted through the mist and onto a side street with no houses or people, lined with thick walls of rock on both sides. His eyes swept the road, watchful for the lights of police cars or of the vans he knew were following him. He was worn from a night of running, but he couldn’t stop. He had to get to the city before they found him. Or worse, before they found Bran…

Suddenly, there was a burst of light behind him, coming over the hill. He spun, and his eyes flashed, the noise startling him for a second—but only a second, as he heard the engine roar and saw the shape of a black van rushing after him.

“No!” he gasped, and he took off in the other direction, hearing the van blast in pursuit. The road was cut through the rocks, and the rising walls blocked him from going into the woods. His shadow was thrown ahead of him, the headlights burning the sweat on his neck. He ran faster, panting for breath, his heart pounding and his feet slapping against the pavement.

Ahead of him there was a flash of motion, a squeal of tires, and a second black van shot out of the shadows, skidding and coming from the other direction. He shouted and turned to run
the other way, stopping and spinning back as the first van slid after him, blocking his escape as the other cornered him in. Clarence ran to the wall of rock, digging his fingers into the cracks to climb, to find any way to escape, but falling to the pavement when he found he could not.

The vans stood still and foreboding, the intense headlights trained on his form against the wall, blinding his eyes as he crouched over. He held up his hands to shield his face and heard the doors burst open, two men coming from behind the cover of the windows, their pistols trained on him. He stiffened and held his hands up in terror, and out of the second van came two others, bald and strong, their faces emotionless and their forms hidden by black coats that swept as far as the ground. Each held in his hand a black wand of metal, and Clarence trembled under their gazes, almost feeling the torturous magic coursing through his body again.

The side door of the van opened slowly, and Clarence whimpered, pressing himself against the rocks. All was still as the last man came from the darkness, standing in front of the others. Clarence looked up at him weakly—the man’s face was rough, his hair light and to his shoulders, power behind his eyes. His clothes were torn and bloody, as were those of the others. Clarence counted them in the light. There were only five…the police must have caught the rest.

“Running away so soon, are we?” the man said in a soft tone that held poison behind it. Clarence only covered his eyes.

“Wouldn’t stick around to help clean up, would you?” the man said louder. “Already tired of the project just because the police break in?”

“Farfield is over…” Clarence managed to hiss, hardly able to breathe. He looked up. “You’ve already failed, Joris,” he choked. “The police are onto all of you. Baslyn is dead, his spirit is gone…and Emry will hide her son well enough so you’ll never bring him back.”
“But you know where she’s taking him,” Joris said, and Clarence jerked his head away, refusing to speak. Very slowly, Joris stepped forward, his form covering the headlights and casting a shadow down upon Clarence.

“You know where he is, don’t you?” Joris said, his voice unrelenting. Clarence whimpered, shaking his head. No…he wouldn’t tell. *He would not betray Emry.*

“I-I don’t know where she’s taking him,” Clarence stammered, fighting against the fear that threatened to consume him.

Joris narrowed his eyes disbelievingly. “Well then,” he said, “we’ll just have to…convince you to tell us then, won’t we?”

“I won’t,” Clarence whimpered. “I can’t break my promise—the boy is gone. Farfield is over.”

Joris gave a dry smile, and he leaned down so close his whisper was loud in Clarence’s ear.

“Farfield isn’t over yet,” he hissed. “We’re going to find Bran Hambric, and we’re going to bring him back.”

A freezing wind blew across the alley where Emry Hambric had parked her car. Her windows were down and the cold chilled her face—but nothing chilled her more than the sudden feeling of dread that crawled across her skin.

“Clarence…” she whispered. Something was desperately wrong. He should have been there by now. She glanced into the back seat: in it was the limp body of a small, six-year-old boy, the boy who was her son. Just looking at his face tore a hole through her heart.

“I’m sorry,” was all she could say. If only it could take back years of mistakes, so that maybe she wouldn’t be there, running from all she had done—knowing that if she could have
lived a few more weeks, she might see herself turn twenty-seven, but knowing in her heart she would not even see the next sunrise. Emry never cried, always the strongest—always pretending to be the strongest. But now, as she looked back on her life, and looked down at the child she loved so much, tears grew in the corners of her eyes. She would never see him again.

“I won’t let them get you,” she whispered. “I promise.”

But just as that whisper left her lips, she felt a start within her and jerked her gaze up, out the back window. She had sensed something move—a shadow, or rather the feeling of a shadow, moving her way, watching her. Someone was coming. And Emry knew who it was.

“She’s found me…” Emry whispered. She thought she would be safe in Dunce. No mage would follow her in there, none of the police from outside either. But she could feel the woman approaching, and she jerked her eyes back to her son. It was too late to run—she’d have to send him elsewhere. Her senses came like a force wrenching her around, telling her she couldn’t waste another second. She jerked around quickly, searching the floor for something to write on: it was empty, not even a spare receipt or a strip of cloth. She tried her pockets and finally found something: an old scrap from earlier that day, with part of something else still at the bottom. She didn’t have time to find anything else, and quickly scribbled her note on it.

“This is all I have to give you,” she whispered, stuffing it into his fist and closing his fingers around it. She knew he wouldn’t remember anything—her magic was strong enough for that. But the least she could give him was the note.

She shoved the door open and pulled the boy up to her. Time was running out. He was warm, but she could not hold him, not for a second more. She carried him to the back, the darkness of the alley sweeping over her as she punched the button on the trunk of the car, swinging the lid open. Without hesitating for a moment, she pushed her son down into it.
She reached to her neck, touching the string of a necklace that was hidden under her shirt, but before she could take it out, she heard a scrape far behind her, and without another second, she jumped forward, slamming the lid shut. Her skin crawled, and she could hear the woman coming down the alley behind her. Emry’s breath was quick as she pulled from deep within, drawing on magic—in her haste, unable to think of anywhere to send him where he would be safe. For the magic, she needed something that came from the destination: a piece of paper maybe, from a house of someone she knew, or maybe a shirt, and her son would wake up in a department store. But as her senses pulled at her, she didn’t have a chance to choose one, and without another second to spare, she flung the magic at the trunk, hoping it would find something to use and send her son anywhere but there.

“Sideni aywa!” she gasped out. She couldn’t manage another breath before a hand jerked out of the darkness, catching her by the throat, throwing her backward to the pavement. Her arm scraped against the hard road as she fell.

“You fool.” It was the harsh voice of a woman, and Emry looked up, her back to the ground. She couldn’t make out her attacker’s form in the dark, but Emry knew who she was. Emry heard the click of a gun, but she didn’t flinch, didn’t say anything—she just lay there, bleeding.

“Lock him in the trunk?” the woman said sharply. “You can’t hide him from me.” She punched the button, and Emry heard the lid pop, sweat forming on her brow.

What if it hadn’t worked? Emry’s heart began to beat faster…but then, the woman stopped.

“Where is he?” the woman hissed. Emry closed her eyes: he was safe... She heard the lid slam, and Emry looked up again. The woman was standing over her.
“Where have you sent him?” she hissed, but Emry said nothing. She just looked away, toward the bricks of the alley buildings.

“You’re going to die either way,” the woman said with no emotion. “And we’re going to find him either way. All it is now is a matter of how long it will take.”

Emry turned again and saw the end of the pistol pointed at her: with no traces of magic, the Magic Investigational Police wouldn't even notice the case of a woman's death by bullet, even if they found a way into Dunce. The woman gave an evil smile.

“Who’s the powerful one now?” the woman asked. Emry didn’t reply, but slowly, slightly, she forced herself to smile. And the woman shot.

It happened in less than a second. Emry choked and her body dropped, all strength gone in an instant. Then, with a mocking, vengeful sneer, the woman pulled the trigger again, and another shot rang out, and Emry felt her cheek strike against the pavement.

She slid her fingers on the hard road, struggling to breathe, gripping the black rocks until they stained the ends of her fingers. As she lay there, she heard the woman give a small laugh, and saw her legs walking past—leaving her behind to die. The world was all above her, the sky a canopy and the buildings towers all around. A black cloud was slowly drawing over the moon, darkness coming over her like a sheet being pulled over her face. She had known it would end this way. But at least Bran was safe.

She felt her strength beginning to fade, her eyes starting to close as death sank over her. But as she lay there, her gaze fell across the street, and sitting there, hidden in a stack of crates, was a little girl.
The girl’s eyes were stained with tears, her face white and trembling; she was hidden, a thin line of fading moonlight on her face. She had seen it all.

And as the night of April eighteenth passed and the morning came to life, a boy named Bran awoke in the city of Dunce.
Strange Happenings on Bolton Road

Eight Years later

Hanging outside the gates of the city of Dunce was a sign that read:

no gnomes
no mages
etcetera

And if you didn’t agree, you had best like jail food. Every other city in the rest of the world allowed gnomes and magic, but for centuries the Duncelanders had proudly stayed the exception. Behind their border wall of brick, the police chief put officers on perpetual patrol for any short gnomes wearing tall, conical red hats. Helicopters regularly patrolled the borders, and every good citizen was quick to report anything remotely magic, in case a mage was around. They had orders to report any etceteras as well, if they happened to see one.
But not even all of that could save Sewey and Mabel Wilomas from the Accident.

“Strange happenings, that’s what it was,” said Mr. Ben Baggeater one late Thursday evening, April twelfth, when the subject had come up among Sewey’s coworkers at the bank.

“It was eight years ago, coming up on the eighteenth.” He kept his voice quiet, though Sewey was long gone until morning. “No one knew how it happened, no one knew why.”

“It was in this very bank,” whispered Mr. Brewer, rubbing his beard. Trolan nervously went on sweeping the lobby.

Ben nodded, glancing about. The three of them were still alone. “So it was,” Ben finally said. “There we were, all closed up, the vault locked tight. Sewey gets here early, before any of us, and like all the other mornings he goes to check the vault, and when he opens the door...there it was.” He turned his gaze to the floor. “Or rather, there he was.”

Trolan’s sweeping had stopped. He and Mr. Brewer leaned closer, and Ben checked again. No one was eavesdropping.

“There was the money, there were the cash boxes,” Ben whispered. “There were the safe deposits and the bills. But there, in the middle of the floor of the vault, was a boy.” He shook his head. “How he got in the vault, no one knows. Or at least, that’s what they say. We all know what it was. The only way a six-year-old could have gotten in that vault was if he was put there, and the only way he could have been put there—” He glanced around. “—was by magic.”

Trolan choked. Mr. Brewer coughed. It was almost as if Ben had said a bad word, but he didn’t take it back.

“No one dared to say that, not to Sewey’s face, but we all knew it,” Ben said. “What no one knew was who the boy was, and neither did he. Wasn’t a memory left in the boy’s head; everything about his past was gone...except for the note.”
Ben pointed down the hall, toward the thick, round metal door at the end that led into the vault. All eyes followed his finger.

“They found it in the boy’s hand, a slip of paper that read, ‘Bran Hambrick, born June 17,’ with part of a note at the bottom: ‘To: Clarence…’

He shook his head. “The rest was torn off.”

The men were silent, an eerie quiet coming over them.

“Who might this Clarence have been?” Mr. Brewer whispered.

“No one knows,” Ben said, shrugging. “Maybe the man who was supposed to pick him up.”

Trolan just shook his head and stowed the broom in the closet. Ben turned away.

“What made it worse,” he said, “was the Finders Keepers Law regarding Orphans.”

He hit the desk. “Sewey’s big Accident: since he was the one who found the boy, according to the Law of Dunce, Bran is theirs ‘forever or until the End of Time, whichever comes later’.”

“Terrible…terrible…” Trolan murmured. Ben just shook his head as he pulled open the front door to the darkening Third Street.

“Leaves me wondering,” said Mr. Brewer. “Who was Clarence…and why didn’t he pick him up?”

“I think that’s something we’ll never know,” Ben said solemnly, taking his hat as he went out. A small gust of wind blew against their coats as Mr. Brewer locked the door.

“Used to be natural folk, those Wilomases,” Ben sighed. “But the way things are now, Bolton Road will never be the same.”

◆◆◆
The city of Dunce was like an overgrown blot on the map, covering miles of land so vast that many wondered if it was not even a city anymore, but rather a small state of its own. It bordered woods and a river, and the inside was mostly suburban, with two lakes and a handful of parks. Few came in and few left, and because of it, rumors about the city grew every year.

The notoriety of Dunce gave birth to streets nearly as infamous, and Bolton Road was destined to be the most infamous of them all. It had thirteen houses on each side, and the Wilomas family owned the thirteenth on the right: red brick, two-story, and since the Accident, generally avoided by the neighbors. Tacked next to the door was a driftwood sign that read:

The Wilomas Family
Sewey
Mabel
Balder
Baldretta

But that was all. After eight years, Bran’s name was still nowhere to be found.

However, Bran wasn’t the only strange thing that had happened on Bolton Road. Just that Tuesday, a dozen red roses had been delivered to their door, addressed to Rosie Tuttle, Mabel’s cousin who lived with them and did the housework. When Mabel tried to take them, the delivery man said he had strict instructions to give them to Rosie and Rosie alone. The card was signed with an enormous, swirling letter B, and the instant Rosie set eyes on it she tore it to pieces and threw it away, and would say nothing about it to anyone.
Instead of minding his own beeswax, Sewey had decided to piece the torn shreds together like a puzzle with staples and sticky tape. When he finally got them in order, he caused such a terrible ruckus on the phone with every Bob, Binkey, and Balfred in town that the neighbors had called the police, who carted him off for a day’s worth of scrubbing the sewers.

Then on Wednesday night, eight-year-old Balder had dashed into his parents’ bedroom, claiming he had heard a burglar trying to break through the front door. Sewey had sent him right back to bed with no more scary movies for a week. Five minutes later, in came Baldretta, Balder’s three-year-old sister, herself hearing someone at the front door. Sewey sent her back as well, with a bag of chocolates to munch until morning. All this was, of course, until he heard the noise a minute later and dashed downstairs, revolver in hand, only to find scratches on the door and some dirty tracks.

“Burglars…” he had muttered. “And I’m plumb out of Burglar-Be-Gone spray, too.” He turned to the others, standing at the stairs. “He’ll be coming back; and being a banker, I learned exactly what to do.”

“Call the police?” Bran suggested.
“No scary movies for a week?” Balder mused.
“Mmbbl?” Baldretta managed to say, offering one of the few candies not stuffing her cheeks.
“No!” Sewey spat. “Bran and I are going to catch this burglar.”
“I think I’d rather catch some sleep,” Bran had said with a yawn, but inside he really felt that watching for a burglar was far better than just another boring evening.

Eight o’clock on Thursday night found Sewey and Bran on the roof of the house: Sewey with his revolver and Bran with a cigar box of bullets. It was unpleasantly cold, and the roof was so steep Bran had to hold to the chimney for balance. Sewey had thoughtfully brought up two pork and mustard sandwiches,
in case he got hungry, and had quickly gobbled both down
without offering Bran a bite.

One hour passed. Another hour passed. No burglar.

“Keep very quiet,” Sewey warned around ten-thirty. “I took
Burglar Methodology and Tactics in banker school: he’ll be
coming at precisely ten-forty-five!”

Eleven eventually rolled about, and then eleven-thirty. By
midnight, Sewey was so bored that he climbed down the ladder
and returned with a briefcase of paperwork to go over. Being up
so late on a cold roof didn’t help matters. Neither did the fact
that Bran was the only one around for him to complain to.

“Cold, cold, cold! Am I the only one in town who cares
about this burglar?” Sewey shivered.

“It’s past midnight.” Bran yawned. “Maybe he’s where we
should be: in bed.”

“Great rot, Bran,” Sewey grumbled. “Every scarecrow
who’s gotten past Basic Burglarology knows they’re never
satisfied with scratching a door and leaving dirty tracks. Mark
my words, he’s coming back tonight.” He shifted. “Now hold
that flashlight still; your shivering is making me write crooked.”

For the hundredth time that night, Bran sighed and lifted
his arm, which was falling asleep without him. To Bran, dirt on
the ground and scratches on the door did not spell burglar.

“Ah, ha!” Sewey exclaimed, pushing against the chimney.
Sewey hardly ever smiled, and when he did, it was usually a
wicked grin. He hardly ever laughed either, but more commonly
wore a frown resembling an upside-down banana plastered on
his face. His hair and moustache were dark, and though he
wasn’t fat, he had gained a little weight since he was younger—
among other things, including his balding scalp and general
grumpiness.

“File this under Evictions,” he muttered. “Old Widow
Todilmay won’t get past this banker!”
Bran set it in the stack marked Evictions without a word. Bran himself wasn’t very tall, but he topped Sewey’s shoulders at fourteen years old, and had dark brown hair and eyes of the same color. There wasn’t much out of the ordinary about him. He was just plain, normal Bran. Most people wouldn’t have recognized him off the street even if they were looking for him.

Bran counted the papers in Evictions, but when he got to three hundred he decided to give up on the rest. They sat on the chimney beside other piles, some marked Overdue, others Dangerously Overdue, and still others Very Dangerously Overdue. Sewey was in a bad mood. That burglar was late.

“Overdue payment on the Bogwingle’s…” Sewey mumbled, scribbling ONE DAY LATE in bright red.

“Another one for Evictions,” he said, passing it to Bran.

“But it’s only a day late!” Bran protested.

“Do as you’re told!” Sewey snapped.

Bran sighed and slid it into the stack, leveling the flashlight and trying to keep himself awake. Usually when he was bored out of his mind, he would rip off a sheet of paper in his room and just keep drawing until he felt better with himself. He had tried for the past hour to scratch some sort of sketch onto the top bricks of the chimney, but it was no use since all he had to mark with was a chip of cement. His eyes moved to look at the houses across the street, as bored as if he were watching sleeping pigs.

Suddenly, he heard a noise that brought his head back up. It wasn’t like any sound he had heard before, the type of sound that he could have mistaken for his imagination if it hadn’t sent a chill through him. He glanced over his shoulder into the Wilomas’ backyard: everything was still, except for that low noise, like a dog that was snarling or the rasping breath of someone being strangled.
“You know Bran, I’m some really good banker,” Sewey said, stretching. “Always keeping these accounts in line, not to mention raising you after that Accident.”

Bran was distracted, but the noise faded into nothing. He told himself it was probably just Ichabod the rickshaw driver, looking for customers.

“It takes great skill to be a banker,” Sewey went on as he set some papers into his briefcase. “But to be a banker and run a household? That is a miracle in itself.”

He sighed as he stamped another paper, half listening to himself, half listening to his pride, and leaving no attention to what he was doing.

“Oh rot! I stamped the wrong one!” He wiped the ink with his hand, which did nothing but smear the words LATE CHARGE into something like tire tracks across the page. “Never mind—put it with the others. It’s the Swinehics anyway. They have enough money as it is,” Sewey said. The Swinehics were their neighbors, and Sewey was rather prickly to the fact that they made much more money than he did, as he knew from their cashed paychecks.

Bran hesitated before taking the paper, and then heard the sound again and jerked his head back up. It almost sounded like someone had spoken a word but cut it off: a strangled, raspy word, like someone was hissing and spitting at the same time.

“Bran, stop shivering! You’re jarring the light again.” Sewey elbowed his leg.

“Hold on, what’s that sound?” Bran asked, peering into the backyard again.

“What sound?” Sewey demanded. “Come now, there’s no use letting your imagination get the best of you. Can’t you see it’s past midnight? Everyone who has half a brain is in bed by now.”

Bran squinted into the darkness. There was a rustling, but it disappeared quickly.
“Bran!” Sewey demanded, louder. “Put this one in Evictions right now, before I evict you off this roof….headfirst!”

Bran finally set it in the stack, and the noise was gone. He told himself it was nothing to be afraid of. He decided to forget all about the noises—there were plenty of sounds in the night. The wind blew the papers into his face again, and his fright was instantly brushed away as he fought them back into the pile. It gave him an idea, and he glanced at Sewey: it looked like the time was right. Sewey yawned deeply, and Bran knew he was getting tired.

Perfect, he thought.

“Oh, would you look at this?” Bran said all of a sudden, taking an eviction notice from the stack. Sewey ignored him and went on with his work.

“Old Widow Gray, set to be evicted three days from now,” Bran added with a hint of sadness.

Sewey perked up, if only a little; but Bran caught it and knew he was on the right track.

“Remember last year, when you were sick with the Shoebug virus?” Bran asked, giving Sewey a little poke with his foot. “Widow Gray sent a card and even baked you a cake, all to yourself.”

Sewey’s expression turned wry. Bran could see it on his face—Sewey knew where this was going. But not today, he knew Sewey was thinking. Won’t get the best of me on this one.

“And she even delivered eighteen rental videos to our door,” Bran went on. “I can’t believe a nice old lady like her would get evicted.”

“Hmmm…” Sewey said in a low, thoughtful voice. “I remember the cake.”

Bran hid a grin. Sewey was going right where he always did.
“You were sick in bed for three weeks, and who came over to see you every single evening?” Bran went on, shuffling the papers in the air. “Widow Gray, wasn’t it?”

Sewey began to fumble around, but it was no use. The problem was that though his heart was fourteen sizes too small, it was still there, and it greatly got in the way of business when Bran poked it in just the right place.

“Oh rot, just hand it here then!” Sewey burst, throwing his hand out. Bran had it ready and with one long, angry swipe, Sewey drew an enormous X over the entire page. That finished, he rolled it up into a ball and furiously tossed it over the rooftop.

“And look at this: Mr. Brooleybob, eviction set for next week,” Bran went on, picking up another. “Remember when we all went to the Banker’s Banquet in Ellensburg, and you took a wrong turn and we ended up in the desert for three weeks?”

Sewey coughed, though Bran knew he was listening.

“He drove all the way across Dunce to mow our lawn, without anyone asking,” Bran said.

Sewey murmured a bit, but in the end took it and scratched a big X over the page. “Any more?” he asked irritably.

“Just this…” Bran took one he had been saving for last. “Old Widow Todilmay. Remember when we almost got evicted because you spent the house money on Balder’s birthday?” He leaned a little closer to Sewey. “I think it was Mrs. Todilmay who loaned us the money with no interest. Because, of course, she knew that the bank where you work would evict us if—”

“Oh, rot, just hand me the whole stack then!” Sewey barked, and Bran did exactly as he was told. Sewey gripped both ends, and with a great heave, ripped every single eviction notice in two, as if his name was Samson instead of Sewey. Next came the Overdue, then the Dangerously Overdue, and finally the Very Dangerously Overdue—all torn and over the roof.
“Well then,” Sewey growled when he finished. “Since I’ve just destroyed all the work I’ve done this entire night, I might as well sign off my own resignation.”

He was always that way when he had finished off the notices, as he usually did when Bran was through with him. Bran only shrugged, but inside he was smiling, though he didn’t dare let Sewey see it. Sewey just sat there, growling and grumbling and fumbling around with his pen, getting ink everywhere and growing grumpier than ever.

“Can’t you give a man some light?” he demanded. “I’ve only asked two hundred and forty times.”

Bran yawned and moved the light upward, and accidentally lifted it too far, so that the beam went over the roof, across the street, and woke a cat on a garbage can. The cat leapt three feet into the air and came crashing down, toppling one of the cans and making a terrible racket.

“Bran, you beast!” Sewey hissed. The can fell over and hit two others, spilling machinery onto the street. Sewey snatched the flashlight out of his hand. “Look at the mess you’ve made of Crazy Tom’s failed inventions.” Sewey held the light on his shoulder. “Now for all the trouble you’ve caused, just sit over there, in the dark!” He pointed across the roof, to the other edge. Bran was about to protest but decided against it, sighing as he sat down next to the ladder. Sewey wasn’t far off, but the light didn’t reach as far as he was, and it was very dark.

*What a mess,* Bran thought. He shook his head and looked at the ladder. But it only reminded him of how long he had been up there; though after getting Sewey to tear up the evictions, he felt much better inside.

Then all of a sudden, the strange sound came again: closer than before, and now definitely for real. Bran sat up straighter and looked around. Something snarled, hissing and breathing hard, like a dog seething with rage and pulling against its chain, choking the air out of itself. Bran went very still.
But just as quickly as it had appeared, the devilish sound faded into the night again. He could hear it echoing in his head. Then he heard another sound, very close, but he couldn’t tell from where it was coming. It was the soft scraping of something, like feet across metal, and it was getting closer each second.

“Sewey,” Bran whispered hurriedly. “Can you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Sewey murmured, oblivious.

“That noise…” he said, looking around with alarm as it got closer.

“What noise?” Sewey asked. “Stop babbling! Can’t you see I’m trying to—?”

But all of a sudden, there was a scrape to Bran’s left, and a jerk of motion next to him. He heard a loud hiss in his ears and gasped, jerking from the roof edge—and not a moment too soon, as the most hideous thing he had ever seen leapt onto the roof behind him.
ran shouted, falling forward and hitting Sewey’s briefcase, sending papers into the air. Sewey leapt up at the sight of the creature, jerking back against the chimney with Bran in front of him, the flashlight still in his hands as the monster’s feet hit the rooftop.

The creature was crouched over, his hands hovering inches from the shingles—his body the shape of a man, though his face was twisted and his skin rough and mottled with green and brown. The black claw-like fingers were thick and balled into fists, and he hissed and gasped through clenched, jagged teeth—that same sound Bran had heard not a minute before. His eyes shone an empty green, his smell like death and sweat. It made Bran sick all the way through, as if someone was jerking the air from his throat with a vacuum. Sewey pulled Bran back as the creature slid forward, looking from one to the other.

“S-Sewey!” Bran stammered, staring at the monster, hardly able to believe his eyes. Sewey held him close in front, shaking and brandishing the flashlight like a weapon.
“Great Moby…” Sewey breathed, his eyes wide. He struggled to train the flashlight on the monster’s face, who cringed and shrieked all of a sudden, covering his eyes.

“Shamblesss!” the creature screamed, throwing his head to escape the light, his voice dry and cracking. He gave a horrible, bloodcurdling scream, covering his face with his hands and stumbling back. Suddenly he gave an enraged snarl.

“He’s going to jump!” Bran shouted, a moment too late as the creature sprang forward, catching them both. Bran fell to the side but managed to grab hold of the rooftop, scraping his fingers. Sewey scrambled but the creature caught his arm, slamming him against the chimney.

“No, please no!” Sewey shouted, his cheeks white with fear. The creature snarled at him, grabbing for the flashlight. Sewey tried to get his revolver up and Bran scrambled to his feet, but they were both too late, as the creature shoved Sewey to the side. Sewey lost his balance and started to roll, and in a second Bran saw him reach the edge and go over with a shout.

“Sewey!” Bran yelled, but the creature jerked to face him. The monster’s eyes were wild. He threw the flashlight over the edge, crouching again, his gaze trained on Bran.

“Shamblesss…” he hissed, purring almost, stepping forward slowly.

Bran slid back a step. The creature gave a low growl, as if he had cornered a victim and was moving in for the kill. Bran knew he was just steps away from the edge of the roof. He clenched his teeth. “Go away,” he whispered. There wasn’t any power in his voice, and the creature took another slow step closer, stalking him, waiting for Bran to make the first move. Bran’s palms were sweating as the creature’s eyes rolled around, watching him closely.

“S-stay back!” Bran commanded, his voice wavering. The creature stepped forward, and Bran held his hands out, ready to
defend himself. The creature tilted his head and let out a small hiss.

“Shamblesss…”

Bran swallowed hard. He had spoken it again, that word. He stared at Bran; going still, as if waiting for Bran to respond. Bran stared, not understanding.

“Shambles?” Bran said softly. “Is that your…name?”

It was the first thing that came to him. But in a moment, he thought he saw a glimmer in the green of the creature’s eyes—of recognition, of memory, of something that was completely different than what had been there before. It almost seemed that when Bran said it, the creature’s muscles relaxed just a bit.

“Yesss,” he finally hissed.

There was silence between them, Shambles breathing hard.

“What do you want, Shambles?” Bran asked quickly, stalling for any time he could. Shambles coughed, jerking forward. Bran stepped back hurriedly, but Shambles only fell, trying to breathe—a black bracelet was around his wrist, its green gem catching the light, and something Bran could not see clutched in his right hand.

“Hambric…” he choked. “Must…take Bran Hambric…back…”

Instantly, Bran’s muscles tightened. The creature…he knew his name! It made Bran’s skin go cold and he jerked his hands up.

“How do you know who I am?” Bran gasped, drawing back. Shambles hissed again, looking up, remembering something, like a memory that was surfacing back to his mind.

“Emry…” he hissed. “Emry Hambric…wasss your mother…”

Shambles looked into his eyes. “She wanted it…she wantssss you to come back.”

Bran was still. “My mother?” he whispered, though he hardly willed it to come out. Shambles’ words struck him
hard—he had never known her. “I don’t have a mother,” he finished.

Shambles hissed, trying to breathe, looking over Bran intently as if there was something in Bran’s eyes he was trying to recognize.

“Her necklace…” Shambles whispered, his eyes moving down. Bran barely caught the words, and he looked at his neck: he wasn’t wearing any necklace at all. He looked back, but Shambles was staring at him with empty eyes, almost as if Bran wasn’t there and he could see through him.

He’s insane… Bran thought with alarm. Shambles closed his eyes, whispering words so low Bran couldn’t hear them; and when he looked up again, Bran saw that the color behind Shambles’ eyes had gone empty once more. Bran saw something moving in his silhouette—a rope! Shambles held it out, tensing to grab Bran and tighten it around his wrists.

“No!” Bran shouted. There were less than five steps between them. He glanced at his feet, and just as he did, he felt the edge of the roof and almost lost his balance. He was trapped.

“Shamblesss…will take…Bran…back…” Shambles hissed.

“Stop, now!” Bran shouted.

Shambles bent over, waiting for the right moment to strike. “Find Bran…bring him back…” he hissed, as if hearing voices in his head.

“Go away!” Bran yelled, but there wasn’t a second left. All of a sudden, Shambles lashed out with his hand, hitting Bran strongly and grabbing hold of his arm. He pulled Bran and spun him around. Bran was faster and jabbed his elbow into the creature’s ribs. He heard Shambles gasp with pain. Without warning, Bran felt something lashing over his wrist, but he struggled free.
“Let go!” Bran’s voice echoed down the street. He slammed his fist into the creature’s skin, but Shambles fought with a strength that was inescapable.

Suddenly, there was a gunshot from below. The bullet hit the chimney and sent shards of brick flying, pieces of it digging into Shambles’ exposed arms. He shrieked, grabbing his skin. Bran took his only chance and pushed Shambles hard; there was another gunshot that missed again, and he heard Sewey shouting below. Bran leapt away, but in a rush of motion, Shambles tripped, losing his balance and falling headfirst into a roll, all the way off the edge of the roof.

Sewey gave a shout, and the gun went clattering off. Bran was nearly petrified, but there wasn’t a moment to lose, so he rushed down the ladder, not even thinking of what Shambles had said anymore. Just as he dashed around the corner, he was pushed off his feet by Shambles running the other way. They fell to the ground, but the creature didn’t hesitate, his knee catching Bran’s chin. Bran shouted in pain, but Shambles leapt up, taking off down the road, and Bran heard Sewey groaning from around the corner.

“Ohhh!” Sewey moaned. “My back! Where is that blasted fiend?”

Sewey was in the grass, searching frantically for his gun, but certainly alive and well, except for a sore back and some very flattened bushes next to the house. Bran struggled to his feet.

“Sewey, he’s gone!” he said as he rushed up.

“Of course he’s gone.” Sewey snatched his gun out of the grass, and then squinted in the dark.

“Great Moby, what is that thing?” he said, and without taking a second to think, he raised the gun and took a crazy shot, the blast sounding through the neighborhood.

Of course the shot missed, and Shambles disappeared into the dark.
“Oh rot!” Sewey shouted, waving his arms. “Get in the car!”

“You’ll never catch him!” Bran protested.

“Just get in,” Sewey roared, already running. He jerked open the rusty door of his old automobile and, finding he had no keys, quickly reached under the car and pulled out his emergency key lockbox hidden above the wheel. The tires squealed as Sewey rocketed out, throwing Bran against the torn cushions in the back seat. Bran managed to sit up as the car flew out of Bolton Road and onto the intersection. He could scarcely see the creature from so far away. Sewey spotted him, though, and punched on the gas, gripping the wheel with both hands. Bran was thrown to the other side of the car as Sewey spun onto Barryless Street, skidding over the curb. Sewey hit eight garbage cans and a row of bushes, uprooting them into the air.

“That burglar thinks he can run fast, eh?” Sewey challenged. “Ha! My old Schweezer can drive faster than anyone.”

The Schweezer gave a loud pop in protest. The creature cut through a fence and onto Gnibnobbin Lane. Sewey sped around the corner but then immediately slammed on the brakes. Bran knew why: Officer McMason patrolled that street and wouldn’t like at all to see Sewey speeding, again. They cruised slowly, Bran’s eyes scanning the houses on either side. There were plenty of hedges and cars that the creature could have darted behind.

“He might have lost us…” Bran said. He moved to the other window and saw no sign of Shambles there either. Sewey went very slowly, watching for any sort of movement and running onto the curb many times. All of a sudden, Bran saw a figure dart out at the end of the road.

“There he is!” Bran shouted, pointing. Sewey slammed on the pedal at Bran’s outburst, and they went flying over the curb and onto the sidewalk.
“Where?” Sewey cried, veering into someone’s formerly well-tended lawn. He spun the wheel to avoid a tree, spun it again to avoid a bush, and went rocketing off the curb—sailing nearly two feet before they hit the ground with a shattering impact.

“Behind us!” Bran pointed in the other direction. The creature lunged down a street, and Bran gripped the sides of the car as Sewey made the turn and they crashed over some railroad tracks.

“Left!” Bran called.

“Right,” Sewey agreed. The car skidded on its side, and the instant they made the turn, Sewey slammed on the brakes again, and Bran almost went through the window. The tires squealed, and with a great *whump*, the car fell back, and the engine gave a small spit and died.

“Oh, come on Schweezer,” Sewey protested, turning the key. It coughed like an old goat. “Come on, we’re so close,” he begged. The engine turned, choking harshly.

“We’re gonna lose him,” Bran murmured. The engine hacked and croaked, Sewey pushing the key forward, but it finally gave in and came back to life.

Sewey looked up. “Now where?” he demanded.

Bran jerked his gaze back to the street. The houses were dark, and the streetlamps were dim. They were all alone. Everything was still.

“Well, where is he?” Sewey asked.

It was just then that there came a sudden piercing sound. It wasn’t the car, schweezing in protest. Nor was it the burglar ordering Sewey to put his hands in the air. Nor was it the many homeowners whose lawns Sewey had ruined (on more than one occasion). It was, in fact, the most dreaded, feared, and terribly despised sound in the entire world to Sewey Wilomas.

“Sirens?” he shrieked with disbelief.
Bran looked out the back window and saw a police car making the same turn they had, lights flashing and sirens blaring through the night.

“Officer McMason,” Sewey muttered to himself.

The officer was pulling them over. And on top of that, they had lost the burglar.
ran hit the side of the car in frustration. “Not again,” Sewey whined, and Bran knew exactly what was coming next.

“But maybe I can outrun him,” Sewey said, punching on the gas for the first turn he saw.

“Or maybe you can’t,” Bran said as Sewey turned into a dead end alleyway.

“Oh, ROT!” Sewey slammed on the brakes as the flashing lights appeared behind them and the patrol car blocked off all avenues of escape.

“Fourth time this month,” Bran observed.

“Third,” Sewey snapped back. He stared straight ahead with a stony face, as if he could just disappear if he ignored everyone.

The officer got out of his car and strolled leisurely toward them as if he had done this many times before (which he had).

“Mouth closed, interruptions, none,” Sewey growled at Bran between his teeth. “I won’t have you laughing like last
time when I told him about the ducks spitting rocks at my windshield.”

“Or the spider tap-dancing with the giant lizard,” Bran added.

“I said interruptions, none!” Sewey ordered. “If there’s one peep while the officer is here…” His voice trailed off menacingly.

Having been through the same routine many times before, Bran resolved to let Sewey fend for himself.

“Good evening, Mr. Wilomas,” Officer McMason said cordially as he moved for the window. He had a thick black moustache like a fox’s tail under his nose. Sewey refused to look at him.

“Haven’t you learned yet?” The officer tapped the roof. “This is a car, not a rocket ship.”

“I have a perfectly good reason for speeding, thank you,” Sewey stated, still staring ahead.

“Don’t tell me you were chased by elephants again,” Officer McMason said with mock surprise. “I guess I’ll have to call Animal Control to round them up.”

Sewey went red. “Those elephants were real! And I refuse to speak to you any more.”

“Well then.” The officer took a pen out. “I’d say Judge Rhine would be pretty hard on—”

“All right, I was chasing a burglar,” Sewey interrupted, spinning on him. “Maybe you should be looking for him instead of patrolling for me.”

Officer McMason looked confused, but only for a moment. Then he just scratched his moustache and paged through his ticket book. “I’m afraid a different burglar ploy was used five weeks ago, and the one about the runaway bugbears was used two weeks ago—”

“Those bugbears were real,” Sewey interrupted.
“Whatever.” The officer waved his hand. “I think that means you’ve run out of excuses.”

“But the burglar is real, too!” Sewey insisted. “There’s a burglar on the loose.”

The officer nodded as if consoling a little child, looking into the air and preparing for another of Sewey’s wild stories. He began to write on his pad.

“Wait,” Sewey begged madly. “I have a perfectly good excuse for speeding. I was…I was…” He threw his hands in the air. “I was chasing a gnome!”

Officer McMason instantly dropped his pen, paper, and jaw, his eyes going wide.

Bran blinked with shock and the patrol car’s lights flickered. Even the Schweezer gave a shudder, as if it also was stunned to hear of such conduct.

“A…gnome?” the officer asked slowly, blinking at him.

Sewey gulped.

Bran had heard about gnomes, from whispers about the simple indecency of them. He had overheard the news on television once saying that the mayor had declared a day of celebration when the police had caught a gnome who had been sneaking around Givvyng Park. There were three basic rules in Dunce that no one could get past: no gnomes, no mages, and nothing that could even be imagined as an etcetera to the first two.

“Yes, a n-n-gnome,” Sewey whispered nervously. They knew what happened to gnomes in Dunce: tossed in jail for life without trial or, more commonly, worse.

“Tell me about this gnome…” the officer said, blinking.

“He was tall and thin and bony, and his skin was dark, and his eyes were green,” Sewey described. “He didn’t have a hat, but he was definitely a gnome!”

The officer’s shoulders dropped. “No hat? A gnome wouldn’t be caught dead without a hat.”
“But it was a gnome,” Sewey objected. “I’m sure of it.”

“As a matter of science,” the officer explained with a shrug, “gnomes are short, have beards, and wear pointy red hats. Sounds pretty much the opposite of your burglar.”

“His not my burglar,” Sewey said. “It was a gnome.”

The officer picked up his ticket book and began writing.

“It’s true!” Sewey whined. He looked left and right, and finding no way to avoid the ticket, promptly punched both hands on the car horn. The alley filled with noise, rising to the sky like a concert of bad tuba players. The officer jumped and started to shout, but Sewey didn’t hear him. He just pressed on the horn, eyes closed, and Bran covered his ears.

“Mister Wilomas!” the officer shouted. “Mister Wilomas!”

He didn’t listen. The officer, growing tired of this game, drew his pistol, pointed it toward the sky, and shot. At the sudden explosion, Sewey went as stiff and pale as a whitewashed board.

“Officer?” he croaked. Officer McMason blew on the muzzle of his gun. Sewey trembled.

“I think I’ve changed my mind on this ticket,” the officer said.

“I’m going free?” Sewey said with elation.

“No.”

“I’m going to jail?” Sewey whined.

“Worse,” the officer said. “I have a better idea to deal with you.” He raised a finger. “You hereby have one week to convince me there was a gnome—”

“A fortnight, for pity’s sake,” Sewey begged.

The officer sighed. “A fortnight then. If by that time you haven’t caught me this…gnome, then…” He blew on the muzzle of his gun again.

Sewey swallowed. “Goodness,” he said.
The officer stared hard at Sewey, but gave himself away when he glanced across at Bran—he was hiding a smile. “A fortnight!” he added, louder for effect.

Sewey coughed. The officer tipped his hat and started for his car. Slowly, the flashing lights disappeared from the walls around them, leaving Sewey and Bran all alone in the alley.

After a while of sitting in silence, Sewey jerked the car into gear and pulled out of the alley.

“How long is a fortnight?” he asked.

“Fourteen days, I think,” Bran answered.

“Fourteen days?” Sewey moaned. “I’m finished.”

And as he pushed on the gas for home, he didn’t even notice he was speeding again.

Shambles ran through the gloomy darkness, down alleys and up empty roads, keeping out of sight like a specter. His eyes swept the streets, his ears alert for any noise, keeping him out of view as he crossed bridges and railroad tracks. Twice the lights of a car came close, but he slid into the safety of darkness before anyone could catch more than a glimpse of him.

Following him were voices—playing in his head, distant now, the pain on his arm from the shards of the chimney bricks drowning their words out with burning screams in his brain. But he knew the voices would return, seizing him fully once more as they always did.

Moving on foot, he crossed the district and came to another: a dirty, unkempt place, with old buildings that had broken windows, houses without lights, and roadways with more holes than gravel. It was quiet, but his ears picked up on cars rushing down the highway far away. Shambles crept to an abandoned building. There were garage doors at the bottom, facing the road. One was open. Shambles moved for it.
“Well, well, well,” a voice called out when he came through, and suddenly four blinding headlights were trained on him.

Shambles froze and heard the mechanical sound of the garage door closing behind him. He tried to shield his eyes from the bright beams.

“Bring him here to me,” the man ordered. “He can tell us why he’s come back alone. Again.”

Shambles felt two sets of hands take hold of his shoulders. He didn’t fight. He knew them, and he knew they were stronger than he was. They pulled him to a black van, both of them big men with bald heads and long black coats, identical in every way, their muscles taut and their necks thick. They shoved him against the hood of the van, holding him backward against it. He saw two other men, leaning against a second black van a few feet away: Craig had long brown hair and was unshaven, and Marcus' black hair was cut short. Both held pistols.

“Hold him there,” the strong voice said, and Shambles saw the man’s shoes slide out from under the open door. The man’s footsteps scraped against the concrete as he came around the side, until he was standing in front of Shambles. He was tall and strong, his hair a deep blond and down to his shoulders. He stared at Shambles icily.

“I see you’ve come back alone again,” he said in a soft tone. “Where’s the boy?”

Shambles only hissed at him with contempt, and the man looked down for a moment.

“I don’t ask things twice,” he said, stepping forward. He glanced at the two men holding Shambles down, and then back into his eyes. He leaned close to his ear, his lips inches away.

“I can give her a call…” he whispered, holding a silver cell phone in front of Shambles’ face.

“She will know of it, and she will not be pleased,” the man said. His eyes moved down Shambles’ arm to his wrist.
Shambles’ eyes moved also, to the black bracelet: a thick piece of material, wrapped twice, in which there was a perfectly smooth piece of rock, clear green. It seemed to glow a dark color, and just peering at it made his heart beat faster. The man looked back to his eyes.

“No…” Shambles whimpered. “Pleassse, tell her nothing of it!” He clenched his teeth, his breath quickening, his arms shaking in the grasp of the men. He could almost feel the sting rushing through his body, like it had so many times before—his screams echoing until it didn’t seem to be his voice anymore, only a distant sound in the dark. “Pleassse, Joris, don’t tell her. I found the boy, and I saw him.” He felt sweat trickling down his back, onto the metal of the van.

The man leaned closer.

“And where,” Joris whispered, “did you see him?”

Shambles’ eyes rolled around. The room swayed in front of him as he tried to clear his throat.

“Pleassse,” he begged them. “Releassse me, and I will tell you.”

Joris studied his face. He finally looked satisfied and nodded to the men. They bent Shambles up and held onto his arms loosely.

“I saw him on Bolton Road,” Shambles gasped. “Where the address leadsss.”

“Was it the same as last night?” Joris asked.

Shambles coughed. “Yesss.”

“Are you’re sure it was the boy?” Joris shot another question at him like a bullet.

“Yesss, I am sure.”

“And why did you not bring him to us?”

“I was ssshot at!” Shambles looked up at him with fiery eyes, waving his bloodied arm. “It was a man with a car, and I couldn’t get to the boy.”
All of a sudden, Joris hit the side of the van in fury. Shambles jerked, but Joris seized him by the neck, slamming him back against the metal, his grip tightening like a vice on Shambles’ throat.

“Shambles!” Joris shouted in his face. “Who saw you—tell me who saw you!”

Shambles choked for air, and Joris squeezed tighter, but then threw him back against the van. Spluttering, he felt his head hit the metal, and Joris spun around, running his hands nervously through his thick hair. Shambles fell to the ground against the side of the van, weak.

“What do we do now?” the man with the cigarette asked.

“Shut up, Craig!” Joris shouted, spinning to him with fury.

“We can go to the house and take the boy tonight, if we have to,” the other man said.

“Someone might see us!” Joris barked. “The boy should have been brought to us tonight.”

He slammed his fist against the hood of the other van and clenched his teeth. “Beat him,” he added, pointing to Shambles, his voice echoing in the garage.

“No!” Shambles pleaded, looking from one man to the other.

“Beat him until he tells you everything!” Joris shouted, starting to pace the floor. Neither of the bald men showed any emotion, spinning Shambles around and pushing him against the metal.

“Please!” Shambles begged, sliding out of their grasp. One of the men tried to grab him, but Shambles bit his hand. The man didn’t shout or show any reaction at all, but only hit Shambles hard across the back, so that he tripped onto the concrete. They bent his arms back, and Craig came forward, tossing his cigarette to the ground and cracking his knuckles. Shambles cried out, fighting them, but Craig laughed cruelly as
the men bent Shambles against the van for him. He lifted his fist to strike.

“Wait,” Joris hissed all of a sudden, stopping them. Shambles fought, but the men held him like two blocks of stone. He looked at Joris with fear, begging him silently for mercy. Joris stared at him, thinking hard. Finally, he shook his head.

“Just put him in the van,” he whispered. “There’s been a change of plans.” He looked at Shambles. “You’ve got one last chance, or else Clarence will die—” He turned, and under his breath, Shambles heard him finish, “—just like Emry.”
By the time Sewey and Bran got home, it wasn’t even that night anymore, but very early Friday morning. Mabel, Rosie, and the children were already downstairs in their pajamas.

“Bran!” Rosie gasped when he came through the door. She rushed forward and hugged him. “Oh, you’re back. I was so worried!”

“Of course we’re back,” Sewey growled, hanging up his coat and getting no hug from anyone. He ordered them back to bed and not another word about it.

Bran lay awake for a long time, thinking about the gnome, or whatever-it-was, and the things he had said on the roof. He wondered how the creature had found him and what he had meant by that name…Emry Hambric. Was the creature making it up? Or was there something true behind it? Had Shambles been trying to tell him something? Questions rolled through Bran’s mind. Twice he got out of bed and sat shivering in his
room. An attic is a very cold place to sleep, and not simply because of the chill—it kept him clearly away from the rest of the household, as if the others might catch some disease if he slept too close. Years ago, when the Wilomases had finally come to accept the fact that he was not disappearing, they had given him the choice of the basement or the attic, and as he had no desire to become further acquainted with roaches and rats, he chose the latter. The way Bran saw it, he had the largest suite in the house.

Since there was so little between him and outside, when it rained he could hear the drops against the hard roof above his head. The place wasn’t like most attics because it was walled in and didn’t smell so much of wood and insulation. There was a tiny air conditioner unit stuck to the wall on the farthest end. It was a mess since nobody except Bran went up there, and thus everyone felt they could haphazardly toss junk up the hole in the ceiling and let it sort itself out. Bran had scavenged together a lamp, a desk, and a bed, and an old, framed cork board on which he pinned various things he drew—not because he particularly liked how they came out, but because when he looked at them, they reminded him of why he had drawn them in the first place.

He did his sketches in pencil, the topmost one on the board depicting a fat, grim-faced turtle with a sling, taking potshots at the Schweezer. It had been inspired by one of Sewey’s previous excuses to Officer McMason. Below that was one of a dozen clones of a blank-eyed Sewey, all teetering down the street on old bicycles that were much too small for them. It had come about when Sewey had refused to get Bran a slightly better bike, even though it was so old, it still had Sewey’s name carved on the handlebars from his school days. Bran snickered at it when the Wilomases put him in a bad humor. The board was covered with sketches like those, and each had a story, but since no one ever came up and Bran had no friends to visit him
there, he was the only one in the world who really knew what each of them meant.

To the left of the board of sketches was a small window that was partly over Bran’s bed, and as he sat shivering, he looked outside—cautiously, though, for still some part of him remembered the awful creature that had been outside just hours before. He sat there for a long while. When he couldn’t take it anymore, he found himself sitting at his desk, like so many times before, the soft light of the moon the only thing he dared let illuminate his face and his work.

He didn’t have any drawing paper, but had been lucky enough to snag an old roll of newspaper the printers had been throwing out. It was warped on one side and caused jams in the presses, but Bran could easily rip off a clean sheet, though with time the paper yellowed.

Sliding his pencil across the paper, Bran tried to summon the creature from memory, its rough face, its features, those eyes. His pencil scratched dark lines and sweeping curves on the page, his arm sliding around little pieces of paper that littered his desk, notes and drawings he had left unfinished. Bran had never had drawing lessons; it just seemed to come naturally to him. However, try as he did, he couldn’t seem to bring the creature out onto the paper. Usually when drawing, he could feel himself forgetting his troubles. But with every line he drew that night, he only seemed to feel worse, until he finally crumpled the whole page up and threw it away. He sat in the darkness yet again, wishing it had all been a bad dream.

*Why is this bothering me so much?* he asked himself. It was maddening. He could not get his mind off the creature and what he had said.

He finally scavenged underneath the bed for his bag of things. The bag was from Rosie and was lined with tapestry print colored with a mixture of dark greens and browns and mustard yellows. He kept all his things in it he didn’t want the
Wilomases getting into, like the torn note with his name they had found in the vault. He took the note out, reading the paper over and over. He ran his fingers along the edge, to where it was jagged and torn at the bottom and where the top corner was bent. He had studied it so many times he had every mark emblazoned in his mind.

Sometimes, as on that night, he liked to wonder about his mother and where she might be, or the reason she had left him in the vault. Had his father made her leave Bran behind? Bran never wondered about his father more than that—he didn't know why, perhaps because his father was simply a person Bran could blame, just because he wasn't there to prove otherwise. Bran wondered if his mother might show up at the door one day, or if she was looking for him at that very moment. He knew he could convince her to take him back, if she would only hear him out. And even though the hope seemed like a thread when set against reality, Bran clung to it each day, to the feeling that he might get to see her face even once.

He had sketched out many things on paper, but the one thing he wished he could draw was his mother—anything that could make him remember her. The oldest memory he had was of waking up in the darkness of the vault, looking up just as Sewey was peering in. It was as if everything that had happened in the first six years of his life was gone: a wall in his mind he could not break through. And the only clue to any of it was the note.

He tried to go to sleep again, but it was little use.

Early the next morning, he got started on his usual routine. There were plenty of chores to do, like shining the shoes, starting the laundry, feeding the cat, and as Bran’s name did not end in Wilomas, he was expected to earn his keep by helping Rosie. As it turned out, the most exertion any Wilomas ever did in the morning was a pinky to the snooze button.
Rosie was rushing around the kitchen—frying eggs, cooking sausages, and making a whole lot of racket—when Bran came in to see if she needed anything.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully. “What a noisy evening!”

“What a long evening, too,” Bran said, yawning as he took plates out. “I hardly slept at all.”

“Me either,” Rosie replied, moving the eggs around and turning the stove up under the sausages. “I heard you two chased a gnome, right here in Dunce.”

“Well, we did chase him,” Bran said. “But we didn’t catch him.”

“Oh, my!” Rosie said with a gasp. “It’s a shame, burglars coming to a nice city like this one.”

“But why two nights in a row?” Bran asked.

Rosie just shrugged. She was a small, somewhat chubby woman of thirty-nine years, with brown hair in a bun and a face glowing with a smile most times of the day. For being Mabel’s distant cousin, she hardly bore any resemblance. The Wilomases kept her around because they wouldn’t dream of doing their own housekeeping, and they used her as a tutor because they didn’t trust the Dunce school system. Besides, they enjoyed feeling rich by having a servant and a tutor to boss around—probably the biggest reason of all.

The alarm clock went off upstairs like the Great Bell of Death, and commotion ensued. A furious sound started down the stairs, and that sound did not belong to an angry troll, as one might first expect, but to Mabel Wilomas. The kitchen door blew open.

“EEEK!” Mabel screamed, her voice shaking the very foundations of the house.

Bran winced. Rosie jumped and sent a fried egg flying into the air.
“What are you cooking?” Mabel demanded, staring in horror at the stove. Bran caught the egg with a plate a moment before it would have fallen to the floor.

“I’m cooking breakfast, miss,” Rosie said quickly. “Like I do every morning.”

“Every morning indeed.” Mabel swept into the kitchen and dashed for her medicine cabinet.

“Look: eggs, sausage, toast,” Rosie said, pointing to each one. “A meal fit for a king!”

“You mean a queen,” Mabel corrected, jerking medicines by the armful out of the cabinet and dropping them on the counter. She was only a bit taller than Sewey’s shoulders and had black hair with dynamic, burnt red streaks, like fire and smoke in a mess on top of her head. She scrambled for a bottle of drops and started to squeeze it over her eyeballs.

“Make sure” –drop- “you cook those eggs” –drop- “to a crisp,” she said, as she dripped the solution into her eyes. “They’ve got to be blackened. Don’t want us getting rispozita poisoning.”

When she finished with the drops, she snatched a long pad of paper from across the counter. “Twenty-eight drops of Endgo’s root, twelve teaspoons of snippery elm, two grams of crushed fiddlesticks…” She ran her finger down the list, piling dozens of things onto the counter and taking some of each. “…then Ingrid’s Elixir, then Snapping Leaf, then Yuletide Extract, then the antibodies, then antiantibodies…”

“And now for the grand finale,” Bran said as she came to the last one.

“…two hundred forty drops of cloromorophlorosocillinium!” Mabel finished at the bottom. She took a gigantic rainbow-colored bottle out of the cabinet and began counting drops onto her tongue.

“The way you’re acting,” Bran said, “one might think you were sick.”
“Toxic!” she spluttered. “All the toxicity of this city is bound to kill us one of these days. All those people, stepping outside without even taking a dropper-full of something! Why, I just read in the *Fitness Witness* magazine—” She slammed an inhaler over her mouth and nose. Her lips went on moving, but Bran couldn’t hear it behind the plastic, and she gave the canister three sprays, breathed deep, and then went into a coughing fit.

“See, see?” she said, hitting her chest. “Toxins! In the air! And it’s getting worse!” She rushed to the telephone. “I need an appointment, a consultation, ear candling, I need—”

“A phonebook?” Bran offered. She jumped.

“Throw it away!” she commanded. “That ink will make your ears fall off!”

He tossed it onto the table and gave up. “Don’t you care at all about the burglar last night?”

“The burglar?” she snapped. “I bet you didn’t wash after handling it. Get upstairs and clean your head, shoulders, knees, and toes, then wake up Balder, before he gets a whooping cold.”

Rosie knew the drill: she took a sausage out of the pan, wrapped it in a napkin, and handed it to Bran, and he started up the stairs to Balder’s room. He made his way through the toys in the dark, flipping the blinds open to let the sunshine in.

“Rise and shine!” Bran said, pushing a few toys aside with his foot.

“Oh, no,” Balder whined, throwing the sheets over his head. “Go away!”

“Time to get up,” Bran said. “Mother’s orders.”

“Get out!” Balder demanded. Bran waved the sausage in front of Balder’s nose a few times.

“Go aw—” Balder started, but was cut short when he sniffed the air. Bran waved the sausage a few times, and Balder finally snatched it from him, poking his head out. In a second the sausage was down his throat, all in one stuff. When he
finished, he licked his lips and sat up, pouting. “I don’t want to get up,” he moaned. “I want to stay right here and rot.”

“Well go ahead,” Bran said. “And when you’re through, you tell me how it feels.”

“Blah!” Balder pouted. “I want that new television, the Megamus Maximus! I want it, and I’ll run away if I don’t get it!”

“Good luck,” Bran said. “I heard they’re looking for underground mining boys up north.”

“I won’t be a mining boy, I won’t!” Balder said, kicking the sheets off. He had the same dark hair as Sewey, freckles around his nose, and he was as chubby as ever. In all their lives, Sewey and Mabel had never intended to make him the way he was, but it was just a plain and simple fact that he had turned out worse than a whole horde of selfish trolls.

“I want the Megamus Maximus!” he squealed.

“What about the one over there?” Bran pointed to the television dominating the far wall.

“It’s old,” Balder snapped. “And the new one is twelve hundred times bigger. I want it!” He kicked his piggy bank off the dresser, then pushed a lamp, threw three books, and finally slid out of bed.

“You’re not going to watch television?” Bran asked with fake horror.

“The thought!” Balder spluttered. “I’m going for the big one in the living room.”

“Baldretta’s got that one this week,” Bran said, but Balder didn’t care.

“I’ll just wrestle the bloody remote from her grubby little hands,” he sneered.

Bran shrugged and started to pick up Balder’s toys, preparing for the worst. It came eight seconds later.

“I don’t want to watch Shink, Nok, and Foops!” Balder hollered from down the hall.
Bran came to see what was up. Baldretta was in the living room, holding a bag of candy in her hands and sitting on the remote.

“Why does she get the big screen?” Balder demanded, trying to knock her over. Baldretta had flowing brown hair, big brown eyes, and a pretty face that was usually stuffed with some sort of candy. She hadn’t yet begun to talk much, and thanks to her perpetual chewing, only the Wilomases could understand her when she did.

“Mbwmbs buwithus,” Baldretta smacked.

“But I’m the oldest, you little monster,” Balder argued. “I get dibs on the biggest screen!”

“Mbwithis bwathis,” Baldretta said, her lips moving in a circle as she chewed.

“I am not,” Balder screamed. However, Baldretta seemed quite sure he was. Bran didn’t care to interrupt, so he left them there and started out to set the table. He nearly ran into Mabel.

“Keep a distance!” she warned. “I found a trash can you forgot to empty last night.”

“I’m sorry, I happened to be on the roof most of the evening,” Bran explained.

“Don’t be snippy. You had best take it out now before rats come and we all get the Gray Plague and goodness knows what else.”

“Maybe leprosy?” Bran suggested.

Mabel went pale. “I’ll have to dose up on some neoplytoplismo…!” she choked, rushing for her medicine cabinet. He tied up the trash bag and started outside to add it to the pile next to the house.

The morning was cool, and the sun hovered just above the horizon, covering the neighborhood with soft light. The grass glimmered with dew. One of the neighbors was driving off for work. Bran saw the Schweezer sitting on the curb, as if nothing
at all had happened the night before. Mr. Swinehic was feeding
the birds and waved at him.

“Good morning, Bran!” he called, and Bran waved back as
he started around the house. Mr. Swinehic threw another
handful of seed and started toward him.

“I picked up a lot of trash in my yard this morning,” he told
Bran as he came forward. “There was a lot in your yard, too, so
I just bagged it up with the rest.”

“What was it?” Bran asked, tossing the trash bag beside the
house.

Mr. Swinehic shrugged. “Couldn’t tell,” he replied.
“Looked like a bunch of bank forms: evictions, overdue
letters…”

Bran smiled but kept himself from laughing, remembering
the night before. “Was it now?”

“Yes,” Mr. Swinehic nodded and shrugged. “All of them
ripped in half the same. Except for that scrap of paper I found
over there.”

He pointed toward the side of the house. “Wasn’t a bank
form and it was all by itself—and it’s got your name on it, so I
guess it’s yours.”

“My name?” Bran asked curiously. He hadn’t dropped
anything outside that he could remember. Mr. Swinehic dug in
his pocket.

“I kept it just in case,” he said, pulling it out. “It’s odd and
doesn’t make much sense, either.”

He produced a single slip of paper, torn at the top and the
bottom. It was very plain but wrinkled and dirty, and Bran took
it and read what was written there:

Meet me at midnight in Dunce to pick up Bran. Since I
cannot save him, you must do it for me; and in return
But the rest was torn off. Bran blinked at it and ran his fingers along the edge, very confused.

“See, doesn’t make any sense,” Mr. Swinehic said. “Looks like it’s torn off something.”

Mr. Swinehic pointed to the edge. “Must go on from there, like part of a letter, but I couldn’t find the rest. Sounded important and odd, so I kept it.”

“Th-thank you,” Bran stammered, unsure of what to say. He turned the page over, but there was nothing on the back except some dirt stains. He looked up to ask more, but Mr. Swinehic had already started back for his house. Bran stood there dumbfounded for a minute, and he turned to look where Mr. Swinehic had said he found the paper.

That’s where I ran into the burglar last night... Bran thought, remembering when Shambles had knocked him off his feet. For some reason, the paper made him think of something familiar. He had seen the same style so many times before that in a second he almost felt he recognized it.

“Looks a lot like the paper with my name...” he thought aloud, but he stopped himself and gave a small laugh. It couldn’t be. There was no way it could have anything to do with something Mr. Swinehic found in the grass—his paper was eight years old!

Still, he was very curious, and started back for the house. It would be a wonderful coincidence, if anything, that the papers matched. He went upstairs and almost to the end of the hall, to the ladder against the side and out of the way. It went straight up toward a hole in the ceiling. Sunlight shone on his face as his head popped through, and he drew the bag out and held his paper up to the sunlight. He looked from it to the one Mr. Swinehic had found, and smiled.

So I was right, he thought. It is the same type of paper!

He looked from one to the other. The one with his name was a torn scrap of yellow notepaper, with soft blue lines for
writing on. Some of the lines had been blotted and blurred, but the handwriting was still crisp and black. The one from Mr. Swinehic was the same, and Bran held the two pieces close together, comparing them. The handwriting looked to be exactly the same. His heart began to pound faster, his grin disappearing. “This is incredible…” He shook his head. “Mr. Swinehic found a paper just like—”

Bran froze. He saw something he hadn’t noticed before. When he moved the paper with his name to the top of the other, the edges fit along the tear.

He held both pieces still, though his hands shook as he studied it. He could do nothing but stare from one to the other, and to the edges that fit so perfectly.

“I don’t believe it…” he told himself, but it was right before his eyes. Where the blue lines at the bottom of his paper ended, they continued onto the second slip of paper. He read the page:

Bran Hambric, born June 17
To: Clarence
Meet me at midnight in Dunce to pick up Bran. Since I cannot save him, you must do it for me; and in return

The rest was torn off there. Bran shook his head with disbelief. How did the paper get outside their house? He remembered again how Shambles had run into him—he had dropped it!

Questions raced through Bran’s mind. He told himself over and over it didn’t mean anything, but as he looked at the edges of the paper and the handwriting, he knew something strange was happening. He ran his finger along the bottom.

“How did Shambles get this?” he whispered. He wondered if he had gotten it from Clarence, or worse, killed him for it. And where was the last piece, missing from the bottom?
There’s more... he thought. *The paper goes on from there!*
All those years of knowing for sure the scrap of paper was the only thing left of his past seemed to vanish in front of him. Now, there was more.

“This note is part of a whole letter,” he realized with shock.
On the third night of the third month of 2003, at age 14, Kaleb Nation suddenly imagined a boy and a banker on a roof, waiting for a burglar to come. From that original idea was born the story of Bran Hambric. The first novel would take most of Kaleb’s teenage years to complete.

Aside from writing, Kaleb is a blogger and a former radio host. He turned 20 in 2008 and attends college in Texas. His website is at www.kalebnation.com.

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