

MISFIT'S MAGIC  
SHADES OF WINTER

*Fred Gracely*

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## CHAPTER 1



## Trouble

GOFF woke up with a start, sweat dripping down his temples. A chilly pre-winter moon sent its silver glow through the many panes of the tall dorm room windows. A dozen feet away, rectangles of light landed on Halstrom Fint, Goff's friend from Spraksville Junior High, lying in his wooden sleigh bed with arms crossed over his chest like a vampire. Goff couldn't shake the dark feeling of the nightmare he'd just had. He felt as if he could still smell the rotting fish stench of the gargoyle and the scent of wax and oregano from the black candles. It all seemed as clear as if he had really been there.

The nightmare had started with the gargoyle coming through a window into a dark study lined with bookshelves. Goff felt certain it was the same nasty gargoyle that had tried to kill him a year ago, the night he saved the world. It had the same narrow, angled eyes and chunky snout, but it was hard to tell gargoyles apart. They were all a blend of gross and terrifying.

"Is it done?" the gargoyle had asked, his voice slick and oily. "If so, the book must be returned immediately."

“It is done,” a man said in a deep, hoarse voice while sitting at an enormous mahogany desk inlaid with carved skeletons. He pulled deeply on a long reading pipe, turning the tobacco into a fiery volcano. The smoke scented the air with cherry and burnt nutmeg.

On top of the desk, illuminated by the light of a black candle, sat a large book opened to a page written in swirling letters and decorated with intricate drawings filled with dull colors. It looked like the kind of boring book they make you look at for far too long on museum field trips while a teacher prattles on about its history. The man exhaled a cloud of smoke and reached over to close it carefully as if moving any part of it too hastily might break it.

“Human hands have not touched that book in thousands of years,” the gargoyle said. “I hope you have shown it due respect.”

“I have,” the man said, his bones cracking as he stood. “And, it has served its purpose.”

He lifted the book, revealing what was set into the scaly green mackerel pattern cover: an eye with a hexagon pupil. It blinked and twisted around as if trying to figure out where it was and who was holding it.

“She’s there,” the man said, pointing to the far corner of the room, “no idea that she is no longer in the real world and no longer a threat to our plans. I’ve put ample protections in place to keep her there.”

Where he pointed, a glowing sphere the size of a bowling ball rested on a tripod on a small table. Bits of light swirled inside it like a freshly shaken snow globe. In the center of the tiny storm floated a girl with long, flowing silver hair and blue eyes, wide open

but blank and lost in a different world. Soft violet robes shimmered and swayed around her.

Majesty!—the queen of all magic frozen in glass like some prized sea shell. She had been Goff's magic and friend when he first became a wizard.

Carrying the book with the curious eye over to the gargoyle perched on the window sill, the man held it out for the creature to take.

"I hope you understand that what we have done here is strictly forbidden," the gargoyle said, gently taking the book from the man's hands. "If they discovered you were in possession of this book, they would chop your head off. You must tell no one."

"No one will find out."

"And the boy?"

Sniggering, the man exhaled smoke through his nose, and it spread out in a cloud around him. "He got lucky last time, that's all. What could a clueless little misfit possibly do to topple such a masterful plan? He will cause us no trouble, and the days are numbered for him and his pesky friends."

"Let's hope that is the case."

"We have nothing to fear." The man shifted his gaze to a painting on the far wall and gestured toward it with his pipe. The painting's thick, broad strokes were streaked with cracks like a tile mosaic and depicted a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark, intense eyes and greasy black hair that hung from a lofty brow. "Everything is coming together, just as *he* planned."

"Excellent." The gargoyle turned and dropped like an owl targeting a fleeing field mouse. Several feet from the ground, it beat its massive wings to rise above a row of tall,

pointy white pines at the property's edge. The man watched its silhouette pass in front of the full moon, then walked to the door, where he grabbed a cane with a gold gargoyle on top, then donned a long black wool overcoat and top hat, and left.

His cane clicked down the thirteen granite steps of an immense stone mansion as he descended. Walking along the mist-covered brick walkway, he passed an odd tree with fog swirling around it. Its branches were a tangle of gray pythons, but it was barely a tree anymore. A large crack ran down the middle. Both halves, devoid of leaves and brittle, fell to the side, almost touching the ground. He stopped to stand before it, inhaled deeply from his pipe, and exhaled a perfect little cloud. As the smoke floated toward the unfortunate tree, the man broke the silence with a raspy, wicked laugh and then clicked down the brick path toward the front gate, his breath freezing into a silver wake trailing behind him.

That's when Goff had awoken. His heart ached at having seen Majesty trapped in a glass ball in some wicked man's study, and the Lady of the Tree barren and split down the middle. She had been the magical creature who'd guided him to find a way to stop the ritual in Monstraxen last Halloween. At no point had the man's face been visible, but his voice was burned into Goff's memory, as was the cherry and burnt nutmeg smell of his pipe: sweet, bitter, and nasty at the same time. He almost felt like he could smell it now in the dorm room.

But it had only been a dream.

*Yes, just a bad dream...*

Goff stared up at the moon's shadow that was deepening the grooves of the basilica-patterned tin tiles twelve feet above. Ever since he had arrived at Amworth after nearly

losing his life saving Spraksville and the whole world last Halloween, nightmares were a frequent occurrence. They came in all shapes and sizes, but they all shared one common theme—the world of magic roaring back into his life and taking away everything he loved. There was nothing he feared more. He was truly happy now. He had good friends. He was a student at the greatest boarding school in existence and felt like he finally had a home. Losing that, being cast back into bouncing from home to home, having nothing to hold on to, and being lonely, rejected, and bullied, terrified him.

But they were just nightmares—his subconscious playing out his worst fears.

Nothing more.

There was no magic here at Amworth. That was all in the past.

An old-fashioned analog clock on the wall clicked steadily as the second hand swept around the dial. It was only five a.m. A bit early to get up, but he was too shaken to sleep; he put on his glasses, slid out of bed, and sat at his desk by the window to study. The moon's soft glow didn't provide enough light, so he turned on his green banker's lamp with a click of the beaded chain.

Instantly, Halstrom sat up as if his hips were a motorized hinge connecting his top half to his bottom half. As usual, he was fully dressed for the day—jeans, turtleneck, and beanie, all navy blue. Not a single curl of his black hair stuck out from his beanie despite being pressed against a pillow all night.

“I'm going buy you pajamas someday,” Goff teased.

Halstrom came and sat next to him, opening a textbook. “I don't sleep fully dressed because I lack pajamas,” he said in his typical mechanical voice, a slight accent around the edges adding a hint of cartoon scientist. “The efficiency of it benefits my schedule.

You still have to change out of your pajamas before going to class, but I am already dressed.”

“So, basically, you live in your pajamas.”

“I do not. I sleep in my clothes.”

“Which makes them pajamas.”

Halstrom leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Pajamas are attire designed specifically to be slept in. They are typically constructed of thin material and decorated with images evocative of slumber, like the juvenile flannel pair you are wearing decorated with tiny moons and sheep.”

“Juvenile?”

“The brand is on the pocket—Kid-Jammies.”

“Really?” Goff checked his pocket and sighed. “Got me there, but I don’t care. I like them. They’re very comfy!”

Halstrom shook his head and turned back to his textbook. For the next hour, he and Halstrom sat side by side studying. Goff took copious notes, but Halstrom just kind of looked at things. Somehow, that worked for him. He was a top student at Amworth. At 7:30, they started getting ready for school. Halstrom brushed his teeth and then waited impatiently while Goff brushed his teeth, changed out of his Kid-Jammies into real clothes, and combed his hair.

“Very inefficient,” Halstrom noted.

On the way out, Goff checked himself in the mirror. His glasses were smudged and slightly askew on his thin, pale face. As usual, despite being combed, his brown hair still



looked like a bird's nest flipped upside down on his head. Distracted by Halstrom watching him, he'd chosen brown pants and a matching brown sweater.

He looked like a French fry.

Normally, he would have changed, but Halstrom was impatiently waiting at the door. Goff sighed and put on his wool pea coat, adding a crimson scarf for color and hoping it didn't look like ketchup.

The hallway rocked with the sounds of dozens of boys and girls getting ready for school, some wearing cheap polyester pajamas and others silk designer bathrobes. Amworth had two classes of students: those admitted based on academic merit and those admitted because their parents had donated buckets of money to the school. Designer clothes and well-coiffed hair were the hallmarks of the rich kids on campus.

After fighting through the crowd in the cavernous stone hallways lined with tall windows, they stepped outside and were greeted by a blast of chilly late-November air. The sky was a blanket of bumpy gray clouds; the first snow was not that far off. Goff shivered and buttoned his jacket. Halstrom doubled up the scarf around his neck. The Amworth campus spread wide around them like the grounds of a medieval castle, with a few modern additions sprinkled throughout. Even their dormitory looked like a mini-castle, with spire-topped turrets on each corner.

Lydia Garcia, the third member of the Spraksville world-saving team, was sitting on a nearby granite bench under a drooping willow tree. A large paper coffee cup in her hand released eggnog-scented steam, frosting up her gigantic red plastic-rimmed glasses; her headband hung at an odd angle, barely containing greasy brown hair that stuck out around the edges of her hood. A large textbook lay open on her lap, and sheets of paper

covered in her swirly writing cluttered the ground at her feet. She regarded Goff with her eyebrows raised. “Dude!” she exclaimed, nearly spilling her coffee—Lydia never just said things. Her words were like little explosions. “Are you wearing all brown under there? You look like Tater Tot.”

Goff pulled his coat closed. “Halstrom distracted me.”

“He does that to people.”

Halstrom stepped up beside Goff. “At least he is not wearing his Kid-Jammies to classes.”

“You sleep in Kid-Jammies?” Lydia teased.

“They have tiny moons and sheep on them,” Halstrom added.

Lydia laughed. “So cuuuuuute!”

“Well, at least I don’t sleep in my clothes like Halstrom!” Goff said, leaning into Lydia. “What do you sleep in?”

“Uh...” Lydia cocked her head. “Big girl pajamas?”

“Perhaps Goff should buy some big girl pajamas,” Halstrom suggested.

“I could loan him a pair.”

“I’m not wearing Lydia’s pajamas! My pajamas are fine!”

Lydia leaned back. “By the way—your scarf looks a little like ketchup.”

Goff sighed. “Can we stop talking about my clothes?” He turned to Halstrom, and hoping to end this conversation, asked, “Isn’t it time for you to call Pam?”

“It is.” Halstrom began walking away. “I will tell her all about your Kid-Jammies.”

“Please don’t.”

“Wait!” Lydia threw up her hands, sloshing some beige latte foam on her boots.

“Before you go, do either of you understand the distributive property?”

“Of course,” Halstrom said. “It’s a means of simplifying expressions.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. "I wasn't asking for a definition, Mr. not-helpful-at-all. I need help."

"Then why didn't you ask for help?"

"That's literally what I did!"

Halstrom tapped his chin. "You misuse the word 'literally' often. I do not think you know what it means."

"I do!" Lydia exclaimed. "As in, this stuff literally makes my head spin, and I'm literally headed for Flunk City on my exam today unless I literally get some help!"

"Nearly every word of that was nonsense."

Lydia ignored him and turned to Goff. "Can you help me?"

"Yup." Goff sat on the bench next to her. "I found a few tricks that really help me with it."

Unlike Halstrom, who was at risk of becoming Valedictorian someday while barely doing anything, Goff and Lydia worked hard to earn grades that were good enough at Amworth. To remain here, you had to maintain a B average or better, and the teachers were strict. It was a great place that gave the students all sorts of independence and freedom, but the price was solid academic performance. That is, unless your parents donated tons of money, in which case you could putter around looking cool without lifting a finger and stay as long as you wanted.

Goff began going over various approaches to applying the distributive property while Halstrom walked away to call Pam for their morning chat—they talked every day before classes. Fifteen minutes later, Lydia was getting the questions on the practice test correct, and Halstrom returned.

“What’s new in Pam’s world?” Goff asked.

Halstrom thought for a second before answering. “She wore a pink dress to school, but it was too much for her, so she had to wear all camouflage the next day to recover.”

Lydia laughed. “Ben must have hated her wearing a pink dress.”

“He did. He cut it up so she couldn’t wear it again.”

“Dude! I’ll bet she was furious!”

“She was. She melted all of Ben’s trophies in the microwave.”

“Wow.” Lydia shook her head. “Don’t mess with Pam!”

“One should not.”

Goff laughed and stood up to help Lydia pack up her things. “You’d think twins would get along better.”

“She loves him.” Halstrom carried Lydia’s empty coffee cup to a nearby trash can. “But she often hates him too.”

“A real love-hate relationship,” Lydia said.

Halstrom nodded approvingly. “Literally.”

When Lydia was all packed up, they trudged across campus through the early morning light, passing clusters of other students bustling along, talking and laughing, straps of heavy backpacks tugging on their shoulders. A few minutes later, they arrived at the city of fountains, brick buildings, keystone arches, white trim, lofty spiked turrets, and glowing paned windows that was the academic center of Amworth.

Halfway across the courtyard, they ran into Rolland Nolo and Becky Phipps, two seniors who were the king and queen of the rich kids at Amworth.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Rolland said, his voice crisp and formal like a rich baron in an old movie. He was wearing his usual beige slacks, navy blue Amworth blazer, and

yellow silk scarf that puffed out below his chin. Goff always thought he looked like he should be on a yacht; even his golden hair, glued with a gallon of expensive salon hair gel, looked like a wave cresting across his forehead. He pulled away from the brick pillar he had been leaning against and swaggered toward Goff, clutching a decorative triplet of leather-bound books he'd never read. "We're safe now, Becks—the Ghoul Patrol is on premises."

Becky sashayed over to stand next to Rolland. She came from money so old that nobody even remembered where it had come from. As usual, she manifested retro preppy to a cartoonish level—plaid skirt, white blouse, suspenders, knee-high socks, shiny black shoes, and black hair pulled back tightly with a tiny red ribbon. Plus, her friends called her *Becks*. "I thought I spied a ghoul this morning, but it was just *Garcia* pre-makeup."

"I don't wear make-up, *Becks*," Lydia shot back.

"Well," Becks batted her eyelashes, thick with mascara, disapprovingly at Lydia, "you should definitely buy some."

"Or maybe," Lydia jammed her hands into her hips, "I should just scrape some of the extra off your face."

Becks stuffed her nose in the air. "I use the best there is, but it still wouldn't make a difference on you."

Halstrom tapped his chin. "Then why did you recommend Lydia buy some?"

"Because—" Becks turned a hot shade of pink. "Oh, never mind."

When Goff first learned about Amworth a few years ago, he imagined that it was a place free of bullies and full of intelligent, respectful kids where he would finally meet

perfect people who would make perfect friends. But that was before he met Lydia and Halstrom and learned that the most perfect friends are often perfectly imperfect people, proud outcasts and misfits, just like him.

He usually didn't engage with Rolland and Becks during their daily bully sessions, but he was still slightly edgy from his nightmare. He turned to Becks. "I don't know if you've heard, but a gorilla at the zoo is having trouble getting into Amworth. Perhaps your parents can help him by donating a few million like they did for you?"

Beck's nostrils flared. Goff knew that her hottest button was that neither she nor Rolland would ever have been accepted into Amworth if their parents weren't huge donors.

"Don't let these street urchins ruffle your feathers, Becks," Rolland said, draping his arm over her shoulder. "Someday, they'll be cleaning your lavatory and living in a paper carton in an alley."

"Street urchins?" Lydia challenged. "And who says 'paper carton' instead of cardboard box?"

"Snotty, entitled, rich kids," Goff said, "That's who."

"We are not snotty and entitled!" Becks fumed.

"Snotty, entitled kids say what?" Lydia asked.

Rolland furrowed his brow. "What?"

Becks stomped her foot and elbowed him. "Rolland!"

"Oh, goodness," Rolland whined. "I see the blunder I just made. Can I have another go at that?"

"Wow!" Lydia laughed. "You just tripled down on being a snotty, entitled rich kid."

Becks spun and strutted off, dragging Rolland by the hand. "Forget you losers."

"We're street urchins, remember?" Goff called out.

About ten feet down the path, Val, a broad-shouldered girl with short dirty blonde hair and a broad, dour face, stepped out from an arched opening right into their path. She bumped into Rolland, and he dropped his decorative pile of books.

"Oops," she said.

"Why don't you—" Rolland started to say before he looked up. Val dwarfed him like a wolf next to a poodle, and he went quiet as he bent down to pick up his books.

Val didn't offer to help and looked over at Goff, Lydia, and Halstrom for a second longer than was comfortable before wrapping her oversized brown wool coat tight around her and strutting off.

"That girl seems to never be more than a dozen feet from us," Lydia observed.

"She's more than that now," Halstrom said, pointing as Val reached the edge of the academic center.

"You know what I mean!"

"I rarely do."

"It seems like she wants to talk to us," Goff said as they hustled down the brick path leading to their first classes.

"How does someone seem to want to talk?" Halstrom asked.

"That's Goff's department," Lydia said. "I see a bad-tempered girl with a chip on her shoulder who gives us funny looks. Goff sees a lost soul in need of rescue."

"I just think she looks like she wants to be friends," Goff said.

“I saw only Val,” Halstrom said. “The two of you often add things that are not there.”

“I guess we all see things through different eyes,” Goff said.

“We can’t exactly swap eyes,” Lydia said.

“Imagine if we could,” Goff mused. “The world would be a much better place.”

“No, it wouldn’t!” Lydia yelled. “Thieves would steal those slimy little balls to sell.”

“You do know they’re attached, right?” Goff asked.

“No, they aren’t!” Lydia rolled her eyes dramatically. “Look—they’re just balls floating around in eye holes.”

Halstrom regarded her with a raised eyebrow. “Have you ever considered becoming a doctor?”

“No, why—Do you think I should?”

“Absolutely not.”

Goff laughed and headed in the opposite direction, slipping among the other students. His first class was history, and he was anxious about it because they had a new teacher since their regular one was ill. Would this teacher be much more demanding than Mr. Hansplutt had been? That could mean trouble for his GPA; he was already struggling in this class—too many odd names and dates to remember.

When he arrived at the classroom, he was horrified to see that sitting at the teacher’s desk was a woman, dressed all in black with long black hair flowing out over her shoulders from below a pointy witch hat with a brim as wide as a truck tire.

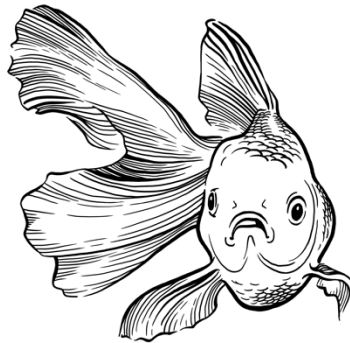
*A witch?*

*Here at Amworth?*



Goff's blood drained into his toes and froze.

## CHAPTER 2



### The Fountain

GOFF couldn't enter the room. He stood half-blocking the doorway while the other kids shoved past, grumbling. The woman flashed him a broad smile with crooked, corn-colored teeth when all the students were in their seats. "Coming in? Don't worry. I won't turn you into a toad."

Everyone laughed, so Goff had no choice but to enter, and it felt like walking through knee-deep mud. The only seat left was in the front row, so he plopped into it and took out his notebook and pencil while trying to calm his nerves.

"Greetings, class," the woman said. "I'm Professor Bishop, and I will be your new history teacher. I'm sure you're curious about why I'm dressed this way?"

A kid at the back with too many freckles shot his hand high in the air. "You're the Wicked Witch of the West?"

A chuckle ran through the room.

"Careful," Professor Bishop said, wagging her finger at him and smiling only a little. "I can't say I won't turn you into a toad." She stood up and came around to prop up her

little round body on the edge of the desk. Her long black dress flowed down around a pair of toeless sandals, exposing just enough ankle to reveal a tattoo of a hissing black cat above her heel. "I believe Professor Hansplutt had you studying the Industrial Revolution? Well, you can forget about that. Boring stuff. The invention of the light bulb and refrigeration and such. I'm changing the curriculum. We will be studying the witch trials of the late 1600s. Fascinating topic that I happen to be an expert on. I think you'll enjoy it much more than hearing about the invention of the conveyor belt."

"I like conveyor belts," Goff said, surprising himself by speaking aloud. "I mean, I like that topic. Can we just continue that unit instead?"

The class groaned, and Professor Bishop glared at him, wringing her hands. For a second, Goff wondered if a ball of crackling red energy would form there. Instead, she stopped rubbing her hands to reach behind her and bring out a stack of papers she handed to Goff. "Well, then," she said, winking. "Since you like conveyor belts so much, how about if you convey these to your classmates for me?"

Standing up too suddenly, Goff bumped his desk and sent his pencil to the ground. A ripple of laughter ran through the room. After distributing the papers, he fetched his pencil and sat back in his chair, trying to compose himself.

The handout was a list of the topics they'd be covering. Goff read it, and his heart sank. His hope of avoiding any thoughts about magic was simply not going to happen. They would begin with the history of the early settlers and their fear of witches, and they would finish on the mania that killed many innocent people through false accusations and brutal public executions.

The rest of the lesson that day was depressing and sad. Professor Bishop even had several students go to the front and enact a mock witch trial. Goff only half watched and stared out the window at the sprawling grounds of Amworth and the spires on the main campus buildings jutting above the leafless treetops. It was pretty clear that

there had been no real wizards in those villages where the witch trials had happened, or there would have been no survivors to tell the story. Then again, maybe there had been wizards there, ones with natural magic, healing magic, like him, but it had been misunderstood. Mrs. Wicket, his history teacher from Spraksville and great aunt on his father's side, had come from a line of witches and wizards with powerful healing natural magic, and one of her ancestors had been burned at the stake during these crazy times. If he had lived back then, they might have burned him too.

He looked up at Professor Bishop in her witch costume with her black cat tattoo. She was not a real witch—he could tell that now. She was just a scholar of this sad era of our history. Regardless, he didn't like that there would be a reason to think about magic again. It gave him a feeling like spiders crawling over his flesh. But at least it was just academic this time—with any luck, he'd never have to deal with *real* magic again.

When the end-of-period bell rang, Goff was the first out the door and pressed quickly through the bustling students traveling in both directions. He was still rattled when he reached his next class, which he shared with Lydia and Halstrom, and he bumped into a few desks as he made his way through the rows to sit between them, earning him a few angry insults.

“You okay?” Lydia asked. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“I'm fine,” Goff huffed, sitting on his hands to hide the fact that they were shaking.

“Did you see Frank?”

“What?” Goff was momentarily confused. Frank was his foster father in Spraksville, with whom he had never gotten along. “Why would I have seen Frank here?”

Lydia shrugged. “You look crazed, and he used to do that to you.”

“Frank works at a loading dock during the day now,” Halstrom said. “It’s unlikely for that reason and many others that he would be here.”

“I didn’t see Frank!” Goff exclaimed.

Before he could say more, Dr. Ichabod Kroll, a wispy dark-skinned man with a tangle of curly black hair and a gaunt face sprouting from a red polka dot bow tie, whacked a wooden pointer on his desk; he always began class that way. A twisted lock of hair fell on his wrinkled brown forehead and danced as he spoke. “Class will now commence. If you have your poetry assignments ready, please take them out. We will do a reading session today.”

Goff blanched. This was not what he needed right now. He’d hoped to spend the class listening to Dr. Kroll ramble on about some great poet as he pretended to listen and calm down. Now he was going to have to read in front of the whole class. He had done the assignment, but his poem was terrible. Poetry wasn’t his thing, and public speaking terrified him, even under normal circumstances.

Dr. Kroll went around to sit at his desk and looked over the student roster. “Halstrom, let’s start with you.”

Halstrom stood up and walked to the front of the room, showing no sign of nervousness or even awareness that dozens of eyes were watching him. He turned to the class, straightened his beanie, glanced at the piece of three-hole punch paper he was holding, and read his poem without looking at it again.

*I wear a beanie.  
Not because it is cold out  
And not to keep the rain out,  
For it is not very good at that  
For rain, I would choose a different kind of hat  
But I don't.  
I wear a beanie.*

*Beneath it, my hair lays neatly tucked away  
I wear it in all seasons,  
and there are no other reasons  
I simply don't want my hair to stray.*

When he finished, Halstrom returned to his seat, making a few notes on the sheet without looking up to gauge reactions.

“You never cease to impress,” Dr. Kroll said, beaming at Halstrom, who looked up but didn’t reply. “Quite unique and minimal but beautiful nonetheless. Well done.”

“I have a few adjustments I plan to make,” Halstrom said.

“A good poet is rarely fully satisfied,” Dr. Kroll said. “You’ve earned an A. Now, let’s move on to a different sort of creator. Lydia Garcia? May we hear your composition?”

Lydia turned a dangerous shade of red. Goff knew she was terrified of speaking in public and, like him, was terrible at writing poetry.

“Me?” Lydia squeaked.

“Yes,” Dr. Kroll said. “You are Lydia Garcia, are you not?”

The class giggled.

“I guess I am,” Lydia said, standing awkwardly. She wore an odd combination of oversized gray wool skirt and pink blouse with a belt pulling in around the waist. Her red rubber clogs squeaked on the floor as she made her way to the front of the class and took out her paper, appearing dangerously close to fainting.

“My poem is about food,” Lydia said, pushing her glasses up and clearing her throat before blurting out her poem like someone reading instructions for how to make toast.

*Pizza is good, but pasta is better.  
Sometimes I eat it with  
cheese and butter.*

*I like grilled cheese sandwiches too,  
Slices of cheddar forming  
a layer of goop.  
I cook it in a pan until it is tan  
And sometimes, I add  
a slice of ham.*

When she finished, she swallowed hard and made her way back to her desk. Goff could feel her shaking from three feet away.

“Interesting rhymes,” Dr. Kroll said. “Better and butter don’t work, nor do ham and tan or too and goop. Pay a little more attention to word choice next time. I’m afraid that one earns just a C.”

“At least it’s not a D,” Lydia whispered, still blushing bright red.

“Regardless,” Halstrom said. “It’s not a passing grade at Amworth.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

A few other kids went up and delivered slightly better poems, some about pets, some about the autumn leaves, and one about cars, and then it was Goff’s turn. He walked to the front of the class with a sense of dread spreading over him. He hated speaking publicly almost as much as he hated holding hairy spiders. His entire body was covered in a light coat of sweat as he raised his paper and was about to start reading it when the period bell rang. The joy that swept over him was better than biting into the best slice of pizza in the universe.

“I guess we’ll have to wait to hear your masterpiece, Mr. Graham,” Dr. Kroll said. “You’ll go first next class.”

Goff was still shaky as he left the room with Lydia and Halstrom and joined hundreds of other students in the cavernous, arched hallway lined with lockers and tall, paned windows. All three had a break before their next class, so they headed to the Nolo Student Center, or “main hall,” as everyone called it.

Despite being yet another building with Rolland's family name attached to it, Goff loved the main hall. It looked like a hotel lobby built inside a castle. Tall, deep-set windows glazed with frost on their grid of white-lined panes reached up to a vaulted ceiling, where ornate wooden beams converged in the peaked center, holding up a chandelier with a hundred dancing artificial candles. Portraits of Amworth nobility hung between the windows, and bookshelves full of leather-bound volumes covered every inch of the wall below the sills, each holding a candle and a balsam spray. Big puffy green chairs and sofas were set around woven carpets and formed little islands where groups of students could meet.

Goff found an empty island near a fireplace and sat in a high-back chair, happy to have a little space where he could stare at the fire and calm himself down. Halstrom sat on one of the sofas, and Lydia flopped down next to him, looking crestfallen. While she flipped through a textbook, she muttered "ham" and "tan" under her breath as if she could make them rhyme better by saying them often.

After a few minutes, Halstrom put down his book and turned to her. "It's due to the fact that they end with a different sound."

Lydia gave him a nasty look. "I wear a beanie? I don't want my hair to stray? Really? I still can't believe that got you an A."

"I don't write for a grade," Halstrom said. "I just write what comes to me."

"Yours wasn't that bad," Goff reassured Lydia.

"Don't patronize me. At least I have choir next. Something I like."

"Advanced Philosophy for me," Halstrom said.

Lydia shoved him. "Show off."

"I wasn't—"

"Be sure to tell them you wear a beanie."

Halstrom pointed to his head. "Not theoretical but self-evident."

Lydia rolled her eyes.



"I have a shift at the cafeteria next," Goff said.

"Perhaps you can make some tan grilled cheese sandwiches with ham," Halstrom said.

"Was that an attempt at humor?" Lydia asked with some astonishment. "Better slow down, or that beanie might catch on fire."

"It was not an attempt," Halstrom said.

Laughing, Goff stood and headed for the door, leaving Lydia to argue with Halstrom about what made things funny. He walked down a brick path under tall, leafless trees with branches like thin gray, knobby fingers stretching toward lumpy oatmeal clouds. Autumn was coming to a close, being chased back by the chill of winter.

Other kids hustled past in each direction, but he ambled forward as if just out on an afternoon stroll with the breeze tussling his hair. He kicked up a few brown leaves in one of the last piles remaining, and as they fluttered back to the ground through the chilly air, a warm glow spread through his heart. After so many years of bouncing around different towns and foster homes, feeling rejected and lonely, he finally had something that felt solid, something that felt like a real home. Being at Amworth with Lydia and Halstrom was a better life than he'd ever thought he'd have. If he could, he'd freeze it all and keep it the same forever. He couldn't imagine anything more he'd ever want than this.

Worried he'd be late for his shift at the cafeteria on the other side of campus, he split off from the other students on the main path and took a gravel shortcut leading to a small circular sitting area. Usually, clusters of rich kids were lolling about, so he rarely took this route. When he crested the angular pines ringing it, he found it empty and immediately knew why. A foul scent wafted up, so strong he recoiled in disgust. Curious, he held his nose and walked over to the fountain in the center, where a mermaid with a seashell top spewed a trickle of brown water from pudgy cheeks.

The pond was brackish, and sadly, the beautiful decorative orange and white carp that usually swam peacefully around in it, floated upside down with their white bellies touching the surface. The plants in stone planters around the fountain's base hung limp, wilted, and blackened, as if sprayed with hot tar.

The warm, happy feeling Goff had felt only a moment ago disappeared. He had the urge to run, but seeing the dead fish floating in a watery grave and the plants on the verge of collapsing filled him with sadness. Sadness and anger.

*What had done this?*

Despite every bone in his body telling him not to dig in, try to help, or ask questions, what was going on here couldn't be ignored. He hadn't used a scrap of his natural magic since last year and had done his best to pretend that the world of magic didn't even exist. Not sure it was a good idea, he hesitantly reached out a finger toward the slime covering the nearest leaf and barely touched it, opening his heart and hoping to create the tiniest connection for some answers.

As soon as his finger pierced the surface tension of the goop, the mermaid stopped spitting her trickle of water, and suddenly there was complete silence. Goff's body went rigid as a dark feeling raced through him, blurring his vision and draining all color from the world. He fought to pull his hand free as the slime raced up his arm, quickly spreading like tendrils of fungus in fast motion. It held like super glue and spread until his entire body was black.

Unable to move, he was aware of the goop traveling up his neck and face, and when it covered his eyes, he was sucked away into a spinning tunnel. Wind howled in his ears, but not actual wind—a stream of reality, time, and location all mixed up, creating a roar like a train racing past. A blurry scene formed, shadowy and dark but clear enough to see a man working at a table covered with beakers, candles, and stacks of books. His long black hair hung in front of his face as his hands moved quickly, adjusting and stirring the contents of a stone cauldron.

As Goff drew closer and details emerged, he saw human body parts—fingers, toes, ears, and a tongue—on the table mixed with the other objects. The man grabbed an eye dripping with gore on a platter next to the cauldron and ceremoniously dropped it in. The purple liquid bubbled over the edges, and a violet cloud lifted from it, forming a sphere of smoke like a fortune teller's crystal.

An image materialized within it, like a little scale model, depicting the park behind the Spraksville Library with the eerie statue of four hooded men and a gold gargoyle on top. Shards of orange sun stretched across the cobblestones between the long shadows of the trees. The willows nearby swayed and swished. Pumpkin-colored leaves cascaded down on a boy with messy brown hair and large plastic-rimmed glasses wearing a wizard's cap and cape, standing in front of the statue and holding a notebook.

*It was him!*

Goff instantly remembered that moment from a year ago. A dark feeling had washed over him, and he'd thought the trees were whispering a warning. The little gargoyle in the park turned its head to look at him, not the boy in the image, but him, here, now in this time, watching through the purple haze.

Goff gasped.

The man's head shot up, and their eyes connected. Goff was taken aback—it was the man in the painting in his nightmare, *the mosaic man*. Shock and surprise raced across the man's face, as if seeing Goff there was the last thing he'd ever expected. His eyes filled with rage, and he reached out with bony fingers, hissing, "You should not be here."