

## the midnight meeting

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“Dad!” screamed Thomas Scargen as his eyes flashed open. The boy jolted out of his sleep. His copy of *Dragon’s Omen*, the third book in the *Dragon Fire Chronicles*, flew off of his chest and onto the bedroom floor. Thomas was nestled in the trench he had carved into his queen size bed over the almost seventeen years of his life. The boy’s feet dangled slightly over the edge of the bed. His breathing was erratic, and sweat dripped from his hair.

Stella, Thomas’s gray tabby cat, had flown from her resting place on the bed, startled by the boy’s sudden movement. She leered at the boy. He was vaguely conscious of what was going on. Thomas’s eyes slowly began to focus on the feline. He could now make out the embossed Scargen Robotics logo on the circular metallic tag that dangled from her collar. She had been a gift from his father.

Stella hopped back onto the bed and flopped down next to the boy. She nuzzled against his ribcage while stretching her white, paint-dipped paws as far forward as possible. Thomas’s breathing began to slow.

Sweat covered his New Salem High School Ice Hockey tee, slightly darkening its light gray color. He pushed his dirty blond hair out of his eyes and tucked it behind his right ear. He noticed he had left the holovision on from the night before. It was stuck on the start screen of one of the hologames he was playing, *The Legend*

*of Gar.* Thomas closed his eyes as his mouth stretched into a yawn. Extending his arms above his head, he turned to the right. When he reopened his eyes, an android was staring back at him. The boy jumped back. “LINC.” The white exterior of the artif was easy for Thomas to make out in the dark. Red beams of light emanated from the robot’s eyes, scanning the boy.

“Thomas Scargen, are you fully functional?” questioned LINC. The robot spoke in a high-pitched but distinctly male voice. His mouth glowed when he spoke. Two optical sensors resided on the artif’s pill-shaped head. “Your heart rate is accelerated, and your brain functions are slightly irregular.” The motherly robot was standing over the bed as the eleventh and twelfth chimes rang out from the clock downstairs.

“I’m fine, LINC.” The boy sat up. “I’m a little thirsty.” A hovering tray floated over to Thomas carrying a glass of water.

“I anticipated your requirement for rehydration upon awakening,” said LINC, an acronym for Learning Intelligence Networked Companion. The boy grabbed the water and began to drink. LINC was Dr. Scargen’s best invention and Thomas’s best friend. The artif was built to serve, protect, and care for the boy.

Dr. Carl Scargen had also filled the home with additional artifs and inventions that were designed to predict the needs of the inhabitants. The machines did everything from household chores to tending to the sustainable farm that occupied part of the Scargen estate. Besides Stella, Thomas was the sole biological resident when the doctor was away. The boy finished the water and replaced it on the tray.

“You know that’s a little creepy, hovering above me while I’m sleeping, scanning my brain and all. How many times have I asked you to stop doing that?” questioned Thomas.

“If you are counting this last instance, it has been approximately 357 times you have verbally requested that I cease this action,” said the artif. “That, however, does not include the 263 instances that your facial expression has indicated the same. After years of observation, I have ascertained that you are extremely adept at nonverbal communication.”

The boy's thoughts dwelled on his father and his nightmare. Dr. Carl Scargen was somewhere in Old Egypt, making history—or “finding history” as he called it.

Thomas looked down and remembered he had logged off and put his wristcom on silent to get some much-needed sleep. “Maybe Dad left me a message,” said the boy to the artif as he raised his wrist up towards his mouth. “Computer, log on,” commanded the boy.

“Request complete,” said a voice originating from his wristcom.

“Status update.”

“There have been twenty-three interactions since your last *Interface* log on,” answered the wristcom.

“How many messages?”

“Your account currently shows thirteen unplayed messages,” said the wristcom.

“Play them for me,” said the boy. The holographic screen that floated above his wristcom transitioned into a three-dimensional image of a teenage boy. Thomas recognized his friend Stu.

“Hey, T, I guess you're sleepin' or somethin'. Me, Eric, and Garret were just makin' sure you were still goin' to the party tomorrow after graduation. It's gonna be so narsh man. Can you believe we're graduating? Especially you, ha, ha. Lates.” The image morphed into a blond female.

“Hi, Thomas. It's Veronica. I was wondering if we were meeting at the party or if you were gonna pick me up.” She tossed her hair back and rolled her blue eyes. “And Thomas, leave that machine of yours at home.”

“Where are the female humanoid's manners?” said LINC. “I am more than a mere machine, I would have her know. I am a fully articulated artif with a superior artificial intelligence. No other artif in the world has a learning matrix as advanced as mine. *Machine* is an inadequate elucidation of my complex functionality.”

“I know, LINC. I know,” said the boy, still wiping the sleep out of his eyes.

“Hello again, baby. I was wondering why you haven't called me back yet, so I figured I'd call you instead.” Veronica's image again

floated above his wristcom. “What do you think you are going to wear, because I was thinking you could wear that nice blue button-up—”

“Computer, skip message,” said Thomas. The wristcom skipped to the next message, and surprisingly enough, it was Veronica again. He skipped ahead again, but with the same result.

“Remind me again, why am I dating this girl? There’s like another ten holomessages from her.” Thomas was beginning to get annoyed. “Computer, skip all messages from Veronica Hollingsworth.”

A different hologram appeared. This time it was his father Dr. Carl Scargen. “Look, LINC. Dad did call like an hour ago.”

“Hi, Tom. It’s Dad. I was just calling you to say congrats on the graduation thing. I know it was touch-and-go there for a while, but we both know you are smarter than that, Tom. Anyway, I am so proud of you.” His father paused. “I just know you’re going to do great things. Sig and I are about to go back in and see how the Diggers are doing. They are excavating in one of the deepest tombs. I sent you some pics if you’re interested. Who knows what they might find down there.” A holofile appeared next to the hologram of his father marked EGYPT PICS. “Anyway, say hi to LINC and Stella for me. Bye, Tom. I love you, Son. Your mom would’ve been so proud.” This last statement annoyed Thomas. His father had raised Thomas by himself. The boy had never met his mother. She had left when he was just two years old. He had never known what happened to her and never really pushed the subject with his father. It had always been a sore spot in the doctor’s past. Thomas had stopped caring about what had happened to Merelda Scargen. He had dealt with the pain early in his short life, or so he had rationalized. *Any mother that did not want to know her own son is no mother I want.*

It then occurred to Thomas that his father had mentioned calling him in his dream. This worried the boy. *Does that mean that it wasn’t a dream?* he thought. “Call Dad,” said Thomas into his wristcom.

No Signal. “Your father is currently not logged on, and his *Interface* status has not changed in three hours, seventeen minutes, twelve seconds. He made one phone call, one hour, five minutes,

and twenty-three seconds ago. Would you like to leave a message for him?" asked his wristcom.

"No, I'll try again later. No reason to bother him over a stupid dream." His father being unreachable did not prove much. This would happen often when Sig and his father were on a dig. The ancient Egyptian cavern did not make for great reception, and his father was a busy man.

Thomas opened the folder with a movement of his hand and began to peruse the pics his father had sent. "Dad never sends pictures of digs. They really must be on to something." He zoomed through the pictures, and although the dig looked impressive in its scale, nothing grabbed Thomas's attention. He closed the folder with another hand gesture.

"It was another nocturnal disturbance, was it not, Thomas Scargen?" Thomas knew this was more than an assumption by the robot. "I have already done the necessary calculations after processing the relevant data that I gathered while scanning the room and your vital systems simultaneously during your nocturnal hibernation. My sensors had previously indicated your achievement of REM sleep. Therefore it is fair to extrapolate that you were indeed dreaming, and from your sporadic twitching and sudden yelping I can also conclude that you were most assuredly subjected to a nightmare. I cannot hypothesize on the subject of said nightmare without more valid information or psychiatric evaluation. Doing such would be mere conjecture."

"Yeah, another one about Dad . . . but this one seemed . . . I don't know . . . more real or something." Thomas knew it was impossible, but he could not help thinking that it was not a dream. It felt too intense, too hopeless, too overwhelmingly real. "I'm sure I'm overreacting. It's just that, in the dream Dad was in serious trouble, and it just felt so damn rea—"

A loud ripping noise cut him off. It sounded like paper being torn in two, but much louder. Stella began to hiss and her ears collapsed onto her head. "It's all right, little monster," said Thomas as he caressed the head of the snarling feline.

“Reeeer!” the cat cried and then dashed away. Thomas looked at the artif.

“What the hell was that?” asked the boy. He grabbed his boots and rushed downstairs.

“I have searched my auditory database, and I have found no suitable match for the sonic disruption in question,” said LINC as he followed Thomas down the stairs and out the back door. The inexplicable sound had originated from the back of the house.

The Scargen home could easily be described as secluded. The house was comfortably settled into the base of a small cliff, which jutted out over the roof. The ledge of the rock face had upon it a single tree. Farming artifs moved up and down the rows of sustainable crops that surrounded the cliff. The Scargens were self-sufficient.

Thomas and LINC hurried outside to meet the disturbance and found nothing. The boy put on his boots as they stood on the grass. The screen door slammed behind them. Beads of water pelted him and his companion. This struck Thomas as odd. Rain was rare in Massachusetts this time of year. He looked up and saw the raindrops grow in size as they made their way closer to his face. The sound of the drops hitting LINC reminded Thomas of the sound of the rain hitting the gutters. Thomas’s T-shirt hung off him, now drenched in the precipitation, and his pajama bottoms were stained with specks of mud bouncing off the freshly mowed grass. There was no sound of thunder, which might have explained the previous noise, nor any sign of lightning.

A faint white glow projected from the cliff top. Then as quickly as the light appeared, it vanished.

“Did you see that?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, Thomas Scargen, my optical sensors did indeed register that luminescent emanation,” answered LINC.

The boy and his artif raced to the raising platform his father had installed to easily navigate the cliff face. The view from the top was spectacular. It was a place that Thomas had spent many evenings in his childhood gazing into the night sky, dreaming of the wondrous adventures that awaited him. He would still go up there on clear

nights and read by the moonlight. The cliff had always been magical to him.

When the platform reached the summit, it came to an abrupt stop, almost flinging Thomas over the rail. Thomas glanced across the cliff, and what he found was unexpected.

A Native American girl, about the same age as Thomas, stood on the edge of the cliff. She was tall for a woman but shorter than the boy and his artif. Thomas had grown six inches in his senior year, taking him to six foot three. LINC was exactly six feet tall.

The teenage girl was dressed in a short, brown, strapless dress made of animal skin. An armband made of the same hide adorned her upper right arm. Her black hair melted down both sides of her head into two long braids. She had few possessions, which struck Thomas as odd. The girl wore a wrist communicator on her left wrist and grasped a deadly looking bow in her left hand. An empty quiver hung from her back. *Why would someone carry a bow with no arrows?* wondered Thomas, but the thought passed quickly, replaced by more adolescent concerns. He found himself captivated by the girl. She was naturally beautiful, from her enchanting face to the curve of her form. *I guess staring at her might be a little creepy*, thought the boy. *Maybe I should say something.* The girl beat him to it.

“You’re Thomas Scargen, the son of Dr. Carl Scargen?”

“Yeah, that’s me. I’m Thomas Scargen.” He smiled at her. She looked back, not sharing his enthusiasm. His smile faded. “But I think the better question is who the hell are you, and how the hell did you get up here?”

“I will explain later. You are running out of time, Thomas,” said the girl. “*We* are running out of time.”

“What do you mean running out of time? I’m sixteen. Seventeen in a few weeks, but still pretty young all things considered.” He was taken aback by the fear in her voice. “I think I got plenty of time.”

“Enough of this nonsense. They are coming. We need to get you out of here.”

“Wait, who’s we?” asked the boy.

A ghostly white figure appeared directly behind the girl, answering

his inquiry. Thomas jumped backward and gasped. “What the hell’s going on?” said the boy to himself. He stared at the odd apparition. The creature was half man, half fox. It had the face and tail of a fox but stood upright. It wore no shirt, but did have the hide of an animal as a loincloth. *It must be a he.* The size of the beast was astounding. He was taller than Thomas and twice as wide. The ghost carried a staff that was claw-shaped at the top. He should have been quite intimidating, but there was a pureness about the creature that was quietly reassuring.

“My lady, they approach from the north, at least a thousand of them in number,” reported the ghostly fox in the deepest yet calmest of tones.

“Then we better get going, my friend,” replied the girl as she turned towards the platform and firmly grabbed Thomas’s wrist.

“I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know who you are or what’s approaching from the north.” He ripped his arm away from the girl. “And what the hell is that?” He pointed at the fox creature. Thomas believed he was at least due an explanation, given the circumstances.

“Forgive me; I forgot you don’t know who I am, because I have known of you for years now, Thomas Scargen. My name is Yareli Chula. I am a Spirit Summoner and a member of the Council of Mages. A Mage Warrior, to be specific, and this is my Spirit Ghost Warrior, Wiyaloo.”

“Delighted.” The words echoed from the large beast.

“Narsh,” said Thomas to the Spirit Ghost Warrior, but he was still confused about the rest of Yareli’s statement. He turned back to the girl. “What do you mean you have known of me for years? You some weirdo stalker witch or something?”

“I am no witch. I know this must be disorienting, but you have to trust me right now. I promise your questions will all be answered, but we must go. *They* will be here soon.” Somehow he did trust her, but he still wanted answers.

“What exactly are *they*, and what are these things after anyway?” asked Thomas.

“I thought you’d be a bit smarter. These, *things*, as you call them, are after . . .”

*Finally, we’re getting somewhere*, thought the boy.

“They’re here for you,” said Yareli. Thomas’s mouth hung open.

*What is going on?* These two had come from who knows where to stop who knows what from getting to him for who knows why. It was all overwhelming, not to mention confusing.

“We have to leave now, Thomas, and you need to log off.” She pointed to his wristcom. “They can track you that way.” Yareli’s voice had ceased being polite and bordered on frantic.

“Nobody can track me. My dad’s just as paranoid as you seem to be. There’s anti-tracking tech in my wristcom, and only Dad and LINC know how to get around it.”

“Then how did they know where to find you?” She shook her head, annoyed with her own question. “It doesn’t matter. We have to go,” said Yareli.

“It is too late, my lady, they are upon us.” Wiyaloo pointed towards the fields. Hundreds of tar-like creatures seeped out of the treeline and splashed towards the cliff, leaving rancid black smoke in their wake. The ground cracked open around the base of the cliff, and even more tar squirted out of the new fissures. These creatures moved in unison and were now hunting in packs. The blackness began to blot out the once-fertile ground.

“If my calculations are correct, there are approximately 1,327 of those unknown species moving directly towards this location.” A three-dimensional representation of the surrounding area appeared on LINC’s holodisplay. On the holomap there were 1,327 holographic representations of the tar-like entities that approached the cliff. “We are severely outnumbered, and we have no realistic means or chance of escape.”

“But we didn’t come to this party empty-handed, metal man,” said Yareli as she reached back into her empty quiver. A single white arrow formed in the quiver. She reached and grabbed the glowing arrow and loaded it into the bow. “Wiyaloo, you need to buy us some time.”

“Agreed,” said Wiyaloo. At that instant, the white beast leapt off the cliff and plummeted towards the tar-like creatures. He landed with a thunderous thud, and before the dust could settle, he began mumbling enchantments. The spirit ghost began to illuminate as bursts of white energy flowed from his paws. The first pulse incinerated a dozen of the dark monsters, the subsequent pulses doing similar damage.

“Narsh,” said Thomas. Still the monsters continued their assault, methodically advancing towards Wiyaloo and the cliff.

Yareli had finally chosen her target, a group of twenty or so trying to climb the south side of the cliff. Melting black goo moved slowly upward. She released the glowing arrow and shouted, “*Wan-blee!*” It sprung off the bowstring with determination, a sight that startled Thomas. Right before it was to pierce the front of the oncoming pack, it expanded into a burning eagle that flew through and destroyed the entire group that was scaling the cliff side. The eagle let out a cry after it had carried out its task and landed alongside Yareli. The proud bird screamed one last time and extinguished into nothing.

“That’s one hell of a party favor.” Thomas could not believe that this was really happening. *Magic arrows, spirit creatures, gooey dark oily things.* It was a bit much for him to take in. “What the hell are those things?”

“They are known as the *Eerah*—or dark ones. They can only be summoned by highly skilled Necromancers.”

“A necro-mincer?”

“Necro-*man*-cer. It’s someone who practices dark magic,” answered Yareli nonchalantly as she drew another magic arrow from her quiver, nocked it, and pointed it at a second group. “*Matto-ska!*” When this arrow was released, it formed into a great polar bear. The bear bounded down the cliff towards two dozen or so of the *Eerah*. The polar bear ripped through the attacking ooze, freezing them where they stood. “They will not stop until they get what they were summoned to retrieve.” As she spun around to see Thomas face-to-face, another group of *Eerah* began ascending the cliff. The polar

bear came to a rest beside Yareli, bowed its head with a groan, and then disappeared into the darkness.

Wiyaloo seemed to have his paws full on the ground as well. The dark ones had begun forming together and attacking en masse. The energy blasts were having less of an effect on them, and it was hard to tell whether they were getting stronger or Wiyaloo was getting weaker. Some had gotten in so close that the spirit ghost had torn them apart with his bare paws. Soon the blackness surrounded him, and just when it seemed like the beast had been bested, he would burst into energy, destroying the surrounding *Eerah*. He would then reappear in another place, and the cycle would begin anew.

“Does that hurt him?” asked Thomas.

“I’m pretty sure nothing hurts him, but if you are asking if he can keep up that pace forever, the answer is no.” Yareli reached for another arrow, but like Wiyaloo it was getting increasingly difficult to keep the *Eerah* at bay. There were now several packs of them encroaching up every side of the cliff.

LINC’s internal alarms began to sound. The blue lights that radiated from the artif all simultaneously turned red. “A new course of action will have to be implemented. Initiating protection sequence protocol.” As the android spoke, his hands transformed and flipped backward into his forearm pieces, immediately replaced by two oversized laser weapons.

“Totally narsh,” said the boy, astounded by his robot’s transformation. “That’s new.”

“I will ensure your safety, Thomas Scargen,” said the artif in a deeper voice than usual.

“Dad always had a flair for the dramatic,” said the boy. No doubt, he had programmed LINC to only use deadly force when the risk factor reached a certain threshold. The current situation seemed to merit just that. The robot leapt into the air and landed on the ledge opposite Yareli.

“Targeting sequence initiated,” said LINC. “Commencing attack, threat level alpha.” The forearm laser turrets on both his arms sprung to life. Bolts of concentrated light erupted from the artif’s

arm cannons, firing down into the black abyss. The lasers ripped through the approaching darkness, temporarily staving off another wave of the *Eerah*.

“Very effective, metal man . . . primitive, but effective!” shouted Yareli across the cliff top.

“Actually, Ms. Yareli Chula, I am made from a synthetic alloy, and I assure you my weapons systems are far from primitive,” LINC fired back, turning his head completely around while continuing to shoot in the opposite direction.

Even with LINC entering the fight, the two were barely containing the situation on the cliff, and Wiyaloo below was noticeably slower. He was still holding down his position, but that would not continue for long. For every one he destroyed, four took its place. Thomas had tried to help, but between Yareli and LINC, he was continuously instructed to stay back from the ledge. Besides, what could he do? He did not have the weapons that the others possessed. He was the target of the attack, and he felt entirely helpless. His fate was in the hands of a girl he had just met, a fox ghost, and his normally docile artif. Fear began to replace his initial excitement and curiosity.

Yareli’s brow was drenched in sweat. She had fired ten arrows, and the dark landscape had not changed. There was no end to the *Eerah*.

Wiyaloo appeared on top of the cliff. He slumped down on one knee. “I am sorry, my lady. I have failed you.”

“You did well, Wiyaloo. Rest now, my friend.” As Yareli said this, the *Eerah* had begun to reach the summit of the cliff. “I will teach these monsters a lesson.” She turned and grabbed an arrow from the empty quiver and fired, all in one motion. “*Ta-tonka!*” A buffalo burst forth from the arrow and charged these *Eerah*. The buffalo disintegrated the *Eerah* instantly. “That bought us a little time.”

Just as there seemed to be some cause for celebration, the sound of one of the artif’s cannons became muffled. Thomas turned his head to see LINC drowning in *Eerah*. The robot had one cannon still free, firing blindly into the dark mass that was about to engulf him.

“LINC!” Thomas had caught Yareli’s attention with his scream, and her focus turned towards the android. She reached for an arrow,

but as she did her arm was grabbed by a tentacle-like formation coming from one of the black blobs. She was flung backwards, but before she hit the ground Wiyaloo caught her. He placed her down with a strong gentleness.

“I have rested long enough,” said Wiyaloo as he jumped upon the attacking *Eerah*. Thomas had never seen anything fight with this kind of ferocity before. It was inspiring, but inspiration alone could not help them.

Wiyaloo ripped apart one tentacle, trying to free LINC, but another one grabbed hold of the artif. It was too late. LINC vanished into the darkness. The only thing that was holding Thomas back was Yareli. She had grabbed ahold of him with a viselike grip and was determined to not let his fate be that of LINC’s. Thomas was losing his closest friend, and he was just supposed to watch him die. Wiyaloo’s legs were suddenly knocked out from underneath him, and he too was dragged into the black. He and the robot were gone, lost somewhere in the dark ones.

Thomas finally broke Yareli’s grip. Tears filled his face as he ran towards where LINC had disappeared. Before he could reach the artif, he heard Yareli let out a scream. Thomas pivoted to look behind him. *Eerah* surrounded Yareli and now Thomas. Thomas backed away and Yareli did the same until they were back to back. The *Eerah* pounced on to them. Blackness filled the landscape. Yareli and Thomas were completely enveloped by the dark ooze.

Thomas was blind. He could only see black. He could not breathe anymore, and he could not move. Desperation overwhelmed him. He felt helpless.

*Darkness . . .*

*Emptiness . . .*

*Death . . .*

*Nothing . . .*

A burning sensation started to fill his chest and began infesting his whole body, moving through him at an exponential rate. It would not be long now. The pain was intense, and the only thing Thomas could do was scream.

The noise erupted from inside the dark ocean that now covered the cliff top. At first it was a muffled moaning, but slowly the word could be heard. The dark layer began to crack, forming lines throughout the mass. A bright light began pouring out from these cracks, and the word now cut through the silent darkness, “Noooooooo!” The scream reverberated and shook the dark shell. The cracking mass exploded into a burst of blue light. At the epicenter of the chaos was one Thomas Scargen. Light continued out from its origin, destroying all of the *Eerah* in its wake. Thomas’s body was illuminated by the energy expelling out of him. His eyes were on fire, and he was simply yelling “Nooooo!” Maybe it was the fear, or the sadness, or even anger that spawned this pouring forth of energy. Regardless of what had brought it on, it was effective. He was floating a few feet above a crater that had formed from the initial shockwave. The blackness had vanished, and his friends—old and new—were revealed to him.

He collapsed forward into the self-made crater and landed on his right arm. He heard the crack distinctly. Pain immediately filled his limb. He was too tired to scream, and what remained of his clothes had begun to smoke from his recent expenditure. The remaining *Eerah* slithered away into the night. Retreat was their only option.

“Thomas, but how did you . . . what I mean to say is . . . wow. I’ve never seen anything quite that . . . that . . . r-r-remarkable.” Yareli spoke with a stutter of someone who has just witnessed a miracle.

“Remarkable?” said the beleaguered boy. “I feel like I’m gonna puke.” The whole scene began to blur. Thomas felt exhausted and slumped over.

LINC sat up and pulled himself to a standing position. The artifact was fine with the exception of a few dents. His cannons transformed back into hands. He ran quickly towards Thomas. “Thomas Scargen,” buzzed LINC. His scans had already finished their diagnostic on the boy. “He appears to be in shock and has suffered a distal fracture of the radius in his right forearm with dorsal displacement of the wrist, sometimes referred to as a Colles fracture.” He picked up the boy who was on the verge of passing out. The deep voice of the Spirit Warrior echoed through the boy.

“Give the boy to me,” said Wiyaloo. The apparition accepted the boy’s body from the robot. He kneeled with Thomas still in his arms and began to chant. His ghostly form began to glow blue. Thomas could feel a shock in his arm. Intense heat circulated through the injured bone. The pain began to slip and the queasy feeling all but subsided. The boy shot up in the beast’s arms like he had just been given smelling salts. He could feel that his arm was completely healed.

“That is entirely narsh . . . but how . . . how is this possible?” asked Thomas as he stood on his own power, moving his arm and opening and closing his hand in disbelief.

“Wiyaloo is a practiced healer,” answered Yareli.

“Well . . . thanks, Wiyaloo. The arm feels incredible.” Thomas grabbed his head. “I was out of it there for a second.”

“Your expression of gratitude is unwarranted, Thomas Scargen,” responded Wiyaloo. “You saved Yareli when I could not. For that, I am forever grateful.”

“That wasn’t a dream? I did that . . . I really did that?” Thomas was gobsmacked. “I don’t know what got into me.” He was deathly afraid of what just happened. It was scary enough being around people who were doing magic, but to do it himself seemed amazing and frightening. He looked at his hands. “How did I do that?”

“I’m having a difficult time piecing it all together myself. There will be more answers where we are going.” Yareli was quick to snap the group back to reality and the purpose of the midnight rendezvous. “Speaking of which, where’s our ride?” As she said this, Thomas noticed something large streak across the sky. The moonlight bounced off the unidentified flying object, making the light dance above the cliff.

In an instant, it had landed with more dexterity than its bulky size would suggest. The ground shook as the creature came to a halt in front of the boy. Thomas was petrified, staring at the oversized monster.

The green, scaled beast was clad in armor and tech. It rocked its head back and forth as its enormous wings folded back. Puffs of smoke billowed out of the creature’s nostrils. The boy could not trust

what he was seeing. “A dragon? Really? A dragon?” He fell back into the crater, dumbfounded and tired. Thomas had no choice but to accept the unbelievable. “There’s a dragon in my backyard.”