

The Human Bird

Chapter One

The Redbreast Robins

Cheep! Cheep!

Three perky blackish-brown birds with bright scarlet breasts were twittering noisily outside Tyler Jackson's bedroom window, perched comfortably on the windowsill. They were all making a tremendous racket, causing Tyler, the young, twelve-year-old child inside the bedroom, to wake up. His eyelids fluttered open and, realizing that it was only three harmless redbreast robins which had woken him up, he lay silently with his head nestled deep into his pillow. He listened to the steady chirping from the birds and the peaceful stillness of the early morning soothed him. He tugged his thick blanket up to his chin and attempted to fall back asleep, but just then, the birds' voices rose, and their chirping became more insistent and disturbingly louder.

CHEEP! CHEEP!

Tyler squeezed his eyes shut and helplessly tried to block out the sound of the birds by jamming his index fingers into his ears, but it was no use. The continuous twittering rang loud and clear, even though the dusty, stained window was tightly shut. Tyler tumbled groggily out of bed and and scowled disdainfully at the birds before marching over to the window. Struggling, he slid the windowpane upward and pressed his nose against the fly-screen. The robins, chirping on the windowsill a few inches below his chin, faltered and gazed up at him with their bright, beady black eyes. "Shoo," Tyler ordered firmly. "Go and sing your little songs somewhere else."

Then, one of the birds did something he could scarcely believe. The robin between its two other companions stuck open its mouth and talked—in English. Tyler expected its voice to be scratchy and gravelly, but, to his surprise, the bird's voice was girlish and sassy. "We were *not* singing," she squawked defiantly. "Only *real* birds sing. *We*, of course, aren't real birds." She delicately ruffled her sleek black feathers in a proud, boasting way. "We're better."

Tyler stumbled unsteadily back away from the window, his white-washed blue eyes wide with terror, and tripped unexpectedly over his skateboard. "You—you can t-t- . . ." he stammered disbelievingly, unable to finish his sentence. He scrambled to his feet and proceeded to back away again until he reached the wall opposite the window. He flattened himself against the wooden door and stared fearfully at the birds, wondering if he should bolt into his parents' room and claim that there were talking robins on his windowsill. They probably wouldn't believe him.

"Heather, this is the eighth time you've scared someone in a *week!*" the bird on the left admonished. "Now we're never going to get any help! I *told* you not to start the conversation with your endless boasting!" This robin was obviously a male. His voice was strong and daring and something about the way he spoke gave Tyler the impression that he was not someone to cross. His glinting, midnight-black eyes were filled with bravery and intelligence, but also kindness and trust, and Tyler liked him instantly.

Heather, the female bird, looked greatly offended. "I was *not* boasting, Austin!" she protested furiously. "I was just telling the truth! We *aren't* real birds! We're humans in a robin's body." She shifted her penetrating gaze from Austin, the tough bird, to Tyler. She stared hard at his terrified face with her piercing black eyes. "We're humans in a robin's body," she repeated coldly. "And that's why we need your help."

"My—my help?" he questioned suspiciously, curious enough to edge a step closer to the window. "W—with what?"

"With things," the bird on the right replied mysteriously. He had a heavy British accent which made it hard for Tyler to understand him. He had a strange, scientific type of voice, and Tyler was instantly reminded of Albert Einstein, a math genius he and his classmates were studying in school. "Things . . . such as defeating the Great Sorcerer for us."

"Huh?" *The Great Sorcerer?* Tyler was afraid he'd heard wrong.

"The Great Sorcerer: a powerful wizard. Evil. Very evil," explained the robin impatiently. His mousy little bird face pinched into a resentful scowl at the thought of his enemy. "You must help us kill him."

"Whatever for?" inquired Tyler. *The Great Sorcerer: a powerful wizard*. It seemed as though he were watching a Harry Potter movie.

"So we can turn back into regular humans," answered Heather. "He turned us into robins, that old stinker. If we don't kill him, we'll stay as birds forever. And I *don't* want that."

"Neither do I," Austin said, plucking a glossy loose feather from his left wing and tossing it carelessly away. Both his companions watched it flutter swiftly to the ground. "So could you help us?" pleaded Austin.

Tyler thoughtfully twisted the bottom of his pajama shirt into a thick rope. Half of himself wanted to help these poor robins, but the other half stubbornly disagreed. *Why should I help these dumb birds?* the less generous half demanded. *I haven't even known them for a minute!* The other half kept insisting that a caring and decent person would certainly decide to help the strange bird creatures, and a selfish and arrogant person would not. Tyler didn't know which half to obey. The birds would probably slash him to death with those awfully sharp claws of theirs if he refused to help them, Tyler realized, eying the birds' feet keenly. He sighed dismally. "Alright," he announced regretfully, marching up to the birds. "I'll help you."

Heather's eyes grew big and round with happiness. "Austin! Henry! Did you hear what the boy just said?" she cried out joyously, as her two other friends exploded into a chorus of delighted cheers. "I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I," muttered Tyler grimly. How was *he*, a young twelve-year-old child with not a single magical power, supposed to defeat a fearful, powerful wizard who could turn an innocent group of children into redbreast robins with a simple wave of his bony hand? *Why* had he even agreed to risk his life to save these pleading, helpless birds, anyway?

He had to speak up, he knew. He had to tell them that he'd changed his mind. But something held him back. Something kept his mouth closed. One small part of his mind refused to say no to the birds. *Be helpful*, the part of his mind advised him wisely. *Don't be a coward*. And because of that small disagreeing part of himself, he curled his lips and said nothing.

After the commotion ceased, Heather's strange intense eyes locked with Tyler's. But it wasn't a menacing, frightening look that she flashed at him. It was a warm, encouraging look that made Tyler feel somewhat better about the risky, complicated adventure that lay ahead of him. *Outside, Heather's a sassy little feathered thing*, Tyler thought. *Inside, she's a cheerful, happy girl*. Tyler wondered how Heather looked in human form. Perhaps she had that sort of stringy, limp white-blond hair and a sharp face that always had a sour expression on it.

"Well, then," Austin announced. "It's time to start our adventure."

"I don't think 'adventure' is the right word there," Henry, the scientific bird, pointed out knowledgeably with a disapproving twitch of his bushy brown eyebrows. Tyler silently agreed.

"But we must hurry," urged Austin desperately. "We only have a certain amount of time to defeat the Sorcerer. He is still weak from turning us into birds. But he will overcome his weakness around this time tomorrow. He will gain his power again, and nobody, *nobody*, can kill the Sorcerer when he is strong. We just might have a chance of beating him if we can kill him before he gets his strength back, but we must waste no time."

"The Black Castle—that's the Sorcerer's home—is in Lake Tahoe, which definitely isn't within walking distance. Tyler, you'll have to fly there." Heather frowned quizzically. "Your name *is* Tyler, isn't it?" Tyler absently jerked his head up and down in a nod. What was Heather talking about? What did she mean when she said Tyler would have to fly? Did she expect him to magically grow wings or something?

“Come outside, Tyler,” Henry suggested. “We’ll be waiting for you near the front door.” The three redbreast robins leaped off the windowsill on which they were perched, fluttering their wings furiously, and soared high into the sky before plummeting back towards the ground, their wings tucked against their body. Tyler watched in pure awe for a moment before wheeling around and exiting his room, trotting briskly down the stairs and being extra-careful so as not to wake his siblings or his parents.

Once outside, the chilly morning air nibbled at his face as his gleaming blue eyes darted around, searching for the birds. They were balancing atop the front porch railing, chirping and twittering. “There you are,” Tyler said breathlessly, the icy cold wind ruffling his golden-brown hair. “It’s freezing out here, isn’t it?”

“No, not really,” Heather said. “Here, this will help you fly.” She yanked out a delicate glass vial from a tiny leather satchel around her neck and shoved it into Tyler’s outstretched hand. The bottle was filled with microscopic little transparent things. At first, Tyler thought the contents of the bottle were salt, but the strange stuff was much too small to be salt, and Tyler didn’t think salt squirmed and squiggled like the things inside the vial were doing.

“Are—are those things *alive*?” Tyler said nervously, holding the vial with a bit more caution after seeing what the bottle contained.

“Yep.” Heather smirked gleefully. “And you have to eat them!”

Tyler stared at her in horror. “*Eat* them? You can’t expect me to—”

Austin lay an affectionate wing on his shoulder. “It’s the only way to get you quickly and safely to San Francisco, Tyler. I’m sorry.”

“Come on, we’re running out of time,” urged Henry. “Just swallow them. Try to ignore the taste.”

Tyler gingerly twisted the cork off the top of the bottle and peered nervously inside the vial. Before he could change his mind, he tilted the bottle upside-down and poured the creatures into his wide-open mouth.

It was like eating sand—*moving* sand. The tiny animals squirmed and wiggled and crawled over his tongue and teeth. They were tasteless, but nearly impossible to swallow. He used his tongue to carefully lick the creatures off the insides of his cheeks, teeth, and tongue and forced them down his throat, then swished a wave of watery saliva around his mouth to clean away any other remaining creatures.

“Good?” asked Heather when Tyler had gulped down the last termite-like things with difficulty.

“Never better,” Tyler muttered sarcastically. He could feel the horrible things scuttling around inside his stomach. He glanced down at himself curiously. “What’s it supposed to do to me?”

He received an answer soon enough. His skinny arms abruptly felt very strange, as if each tiny segment of his skin was shifting and moving about. His feet tingled uncomfortably inside his worn-out sneakers, and both feet suddenly began to expand. Each wiggling toe grew into a sharp curved claw, poking through his shoes. Frightened, yet also fascinated, Tyler yanked off both sneakers and stared at his feet, which were no longer feet. They were . . . talons.

“What’s happening?” Tyler cried in a panic.

“Take it easy,” Austin soothed him. “Calm down, and everything will be alright, Tyler.”

Tyler returned his horrified gaze to his arms. They had stopped tingling but furry little points were poking out of his skin, and as Tyler stared, the points pushed their way up through his skin more and more, getting longer and bigger, until they finally stopped growing. Now it was clear to Tyler what the points were: feathers. And his arms had turned into . . . wings.

Best of all, Tyler wasn’t Tyler anymore. He was a bird. Well, not exactly a *full* bird. He didn’t have a big black beak, or a broad scarlet breast, or a plump feathery body. He only had talons and wings. He wasn’t really much of a bird. He was more like a . . . human bird.

“Like it?” Henry inquired hopefully.

Tyler glanced up at him, his pale face shining brightly with satisfaction. His large round eyes twinkled cheerfully. “It's awesome,” he said thankfully. He feebly flapped his glossy black wings and scraped his razor-sharp claws over the wooden porch floor, marveling at his new features.

“Well, that's good to hear,” Henry said, obviously satisfied.

“But we should really get going,” Austin reminded them pointedly. “We don't have much time, and I don't suppose you would all like to *stay* as birds forever.”

“But I don't know how to fly!” protested Tyler anxiously.

“Just flap your wings,” Heather instructed all-knowingly. “You'll be fine.”

“Um, okay,” shrugged Tyler uncertainly, although he seriously doubted he'd be “fine.” What if he crashed into a tree or a house? What if his wings didn't work properly? What if he was so slow they couldn't make it to the Great Sorcerer's castle in time? What *then*? For the first time in his life, he knew what it was like to be truly afraid. Again, he considered backing out and refusing to help the birds, but he reluctantly decided against it. He inhaled a deep, steady breath which he slowly, carefully let out. “Alright,” he said. “Let's go.”

Chapter Two

CRASH!

Tyler shifted his feet nervously, bracing himself, then with a sudden burst of energy launched into the air. He instantly caught a wind and soared gracefully through the sky for a moment before the breeze abruptly stopped and he had to flap his wings to keep from falling back to the ground. He kept propelling his wings up and down until he caught another wind and was able to fly without needing to flap his arms. So far, so good. Maybe the flight to the Black Castle wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Nice, Tyler! Keep it up!” called Austin, who was soaring alongside him, his beady eyes narrowed against the strong wind.

Encouraged, Tyler flapped his wings harder and flew far ahead of his companions, his chin tucked in against his chest and his thick blonde hair whipping around wildly as the sharp air whistled through it. This was easy, he thought. He could do it. Why had he been so hesitant to try flying? He dipped low and soared high. He sailed majestically through a puffy white cloud and grinned proudly back at the other three birds. Heather politely flashed a smile back at him.

Tyler swooped down low, his determined face inches from the muddy ground. He was so focused on the gently swaying green blades of grass below him that he didn't notice the towering oak tree ahead of him. He jerked his head up as the tree's giant shadow swallowed him in its shady darkness, then let out an alarmed high-pitched shriek as he crashed headfirst into the oak tree's enormously thick trunk.

Dazed, Tyler lay sprawled on the grass, his injured head resting against the rough bark of the tree. He felt painfully dizzy. He pressed his wing against his bruised forehead, moaning pitifully. A million unanswered questions whirled through his mind. Was his head on fire? Why was everything blurring before his eyes? Was it normal for a young boy to suddenly feel very sleepy and tired after he'd flew into a humongous oak tree's trunk at full speed? Last night's dinner churned around inside his stomach, about to come spilling out of his mouth. Tyler closed his eyes. Maybe he could catch a quick nap, just for a moment. . . .

"Tyler!" Heather's frightened yelp instantly snapped him awake. "Tyler, are you okay? Tyler?" She fluttered hurriedly over to him, emerging from the canopy of dark green leaves above them. Her face was twisted in worry. "Oh, Tyler, are you okay? I saw you smack right into that tree and . . . and—Tyler?"

"I'm fine," he murmured sleepily. "Where are the others?"

"We're right here." Austin and Henry pushed their way roughly through the bunches of rustling leaves above them, an anxious frown curving above their eyes. "Is Tyler okay?" demanded Austin.

Tyler groggily nestled his head deep into a shapeless mound of dry leaves. Heather glanced uncertainly at him, then shifted her wide-eyed gaze back to Henry and Austin. "I don't think so," she said. "I mean, he hit that tree pretty hard. Do you think he'll make it? Will he live?" Two pairs of shining black eyes stared hopefully at Henry, waiting for an answer. Henry gazed back at them for a moment before glancing quickly at the dazed Tyler curled into a tight ball on the pile of leaves. He swallowed. Everyone was waiting.

"No." The words rolled off his reluctant tongue and tumbled out of his mouth like a fearful monster breaking out of a cage after being locked up inside it for many years.

Everyone was silent for a moment. It wasn't a peaceful silence. It was the type of silence that occurs when everyone is too stunned and shocked to speak. Then Heather broke it by demanding, "No? *No?* What do you mean, no?"

Henry stared at his clawed feet. "I mean, Tyler's not going to make it."

"Henry." Austin's voice had lost its usual warmth. "You're kidding, right? This is all just some dumb joke. Right? Isn't it?"

"No, it's not," Henry said truthfully. "I don't have a sense of humor, remember? You know that."

Tyler peered at them through his long eyelashes. He could barely keep his eyes open, and his vision was fading. The birds' voices sounded tinny and hollow, like a distinct echo. Something warm and wet trickled down the side of his face. It was crimson red. He was bleeding. He didn't know where the blood came from. Maybe he'd cracked open his head. He certainly felt like he had.

What was happening? Why were the birds turning into plump little blobs of black and red? And did Heather have a sore throat? Tyler could barely hear her. He could barely hear anybody.

I'm dying, he thought dismally. *I'm dying and nobody even knows about it. Well, except for Austin, Heather, and Henry.* Tyler had always wondered what dying felt like. Now he knew.

Tyler squinted dizzily at his companions. Henry had abruptly started shuffling busily through a mini deerskin pouch tied to his right leg with twine. Austin and Henry stared curiously at him. “Henry, what in the world are you looking for?” asked Heather, as crumpled up pieces of paper spilled out of the pouch and littered the ground. “We don't have time for this, Henry. We need to save Tyler! He's over there, *dying*, and you're just taking your time to organize your pouch!”

Henry flicked his head up to scowl ferociously at Heather. “I'm not organizing my pouch,” he grumbled through gritted teeth. “I'm looking for a magical potion that I stole from the Sorcerer! It can heal wounds! Where is it, where is it?” He pushed aside a piece of paper covered in his neat cursive script and fished out a vial of sparkling blue liquid. “Oh, here it is,” he said. Without bothering to clean up his belongings, he fluttered over to Tyler with the bottle tucked under his wing.

“Tyler,” he instructed. “Open your mouth.”

Tyler obeyed him. His jaws hurt so badly that for a second he thought he'd rather die than feel this pain.

A soothing smile shimmered on Henry's face as he slowly, carefully raised the bottle to Tyler's trembling lips and tipped the blue liquid into his mouth. It tasted bittersweet, like the sour green apples Tyler sometimes plucked from the apple tree in his mother's garden. As he swallowed the last drops of blue liquid, his vision magically became clear as crystal like it had been before and he could suddenly hear the world's music all around him again. He had gained his senses back! Then the pain in his head subsided. The large black bruises on his forehead disappeared. Even the old scab on his knee vanished.

“Tyler?” Henry timidly prodded Tyler's arm with a careful wing. He was bending anxiously over him, staring into Tyler's sapphire-blue eyes with his own beady black ones.

“Yeah?” Tyler muttered softly.

Henry's face lit up. "He's okay!" he cried out, throwing his stubby wings around Tyler's neck. "The medicine worked!"

Austin and Heather were beside him in a moment. "It did?" Heather questioned hopefully, peering over Henry's shoulder.

"Of course it did," Tyler replied cheerfully, using his elbows to push himself into a sitting position with his legs outstretched in front of him. "See? I'm fine."

"Oh, thank God you're okay." Austin sighed with relief, placing a wing over his tiny, fast-beating heart. "But without that medicine you'd be . . ." He couldn't bring himself to say the dreaded word, so instead he affectionately pecked Tyler on the arm with his pointed beak. Heather and Henry did the same. Tyler's arm prickled with pain.

"Are your wings fine, too?" inquired Henry. "Can you move them?"

Tyler easily swished his wings up and down, blasting a gust of air in every direction like a fan and blowing all of Henry's notes and papers away. Austin helpfully fluttered around and snatched them up in his beak, then returned the papers to Henry.

"Yes, thank you," Henry said, carelessly shoving the papers into his mini pouch and clipping it shut.

"Doesn't Austin have one of those?" Tyler asked curiously.

"One of what?" Henry said.

"A pouch," answered Tyler. "Or a satchel, like Heather has."

"Of course I do," Austin said. "Right here." He presented his bottom to Tyler and ruffled the delicate feathers on his tail. Tied to the very tip of his behind with colorful light blue yarn was a bulging brown leather bag. It was quite large, bigger than Heather's satchel and Henry's pouch, and Austin had forgotten to close the zipper, so Tyler could clearly see the bag's contents—many bottles and vials of strange glittering liquid, a mini pistol loaded with toothpicks for ammo, a couple of big triangle-shaped rocks (for throwing at the Great Sorcerer, Tyler supposed), and a silver whistle.

“Isn't that heavy?” Tyler demanded, frowning as he lightly ran his finger down the smooth dark brown leather.

“It would be,” Austin explained, “if Henry hadn't sprinkled some of the Sorcerer's Weightless Powder on all of our bags.”

“You guys seem to have a lot of the Sorcerer's magical potions,” Tyler observed.

“We stole them,” Heather said proudly. “We sneaked into the Black Castle the night he turned us into birds and stole a bunch of his potions. We had been trying to find one that would turn us back into humans without needing to kill him, but we couldn't find it.”

“He must have hidden it,” Tyler said.

“He did,” Henry said. “He knew we'd sneak into his castle, so he hid it in one of his secret chambers among all the other special potions. We looked everywhere, and none of us could find the chamber.”

“Oh.”

There was a thoughtful silence for a moment, as the three birds flashed back to the time when they had crept into the Black Castle in the dead of the night, whispering to each other in hushed voices while they scanned the rows and rows of shelves crammed with bottles and vials, searching desperately for a potion that would turn them back into humans. And Tyler thought silently of his mother and his father and his feisty little brother and his bratty older sister and his parents' precious baby boy and he wondered if he'd ever see them again. He knew, way back in the corner of his mind, that he most likely wouldn't, but he forced himself not to think about it.

“Well, we'd better get going,” Austin announced abruptly, causing everybody to snap out of their thoughts.

“Yes, we'd better,” agreed Henry quickly. “We've been wasting time ever since Tyler crashed into that tree.”

“Let's go,” Tyler said, and all four of them launched into the sky.

Chapter Three

Heather's Story

Tyler swished his wings up and down, pumping his arms hard until he caught a strong wind that blew him gracefully across the sky. He and the other three birds had been flying for nearly two hours. Tyler had gotten used to the icy wind that stung his face sharply and pushed his ruffled golden hair back off his forehead. His arms ached slightly, but the pain in his wings was so minor he could hardly feel it. Tyler was careful not to crash into anything, and he avoided every tall tree that crossed his path. He and his companions had left behind the little town where Tyler and his family lived, and now the village was nothing more than a distant cluster of houses and buildings perched lazily on the horizon. They were now flying over endless plains with small red-and-white farmhouses scattered everywhere, with large spotted cows mooing in the barnyards and well-kept crops growing in neat little rows in farmers' fields. It was a beautiful sight.

"I wish I lived on a farm," Tyler said wistfully.

"Then you'd have to deal with cow manure and horse poop," Austin reminded him. "And you'd have really hard chores such as feeding the animals and tending the crops."

"Still," Tyler said longingly, "it would be fun."

"Maybe," Austin replied.

There was a while of silence as the four friends flew through the air. Eventually, Tyler broke it by inquiring, "Did you go back home after the Sorcerer turned you guys into birds?"

"No," Heather answered sadly. "We didn't dare."

"The police were searching for all of us," Henry added miserably. "Nobody could find us. Mother was in tears."

"Were you friends before the Sorcerer turned you into birds?" Tyler questioned curiously.

"Yeah," Austin said. "We were next-door neighbors, all of us."

“In the winter, we took a trip together with our families,” Heather recalled dreamily. “We went to Lake Tahoe. That was where we met the Sorcerer for the first time.” Her expression darkened gloomily. “My mom had sent us up to my hotel room to play while she and the other parents got some coffee from the cafe. When I opened the hotel door, the first thing we saw was the Sorcerer standing in the doorway.” Her bushy eyebrows bent low over her dull black eyes as she remembered encountering the Sorcerer for the first time. Tyler wondered what the Sorcerer looked like. He imagined him as a mysterious wizard who dressed in a long midnight-black cloak that billowed out behind him whenever he walked, with its hood covering his head protectively. You couldn't see his face, just his twinkling ruby-red eyes shining like flashlights. He had a black leather belt around his waist, with a little pouch for him to keep his razor-sharp knife in. And he was terribly vicious, like a wild tiger. He had no patience, and he'd slit the throat of anybody who dared to cross his path. . . .

Just thinking about the Sorcerer made Tyler shudder violently. How could *he*, an innocent twelve-year-old child, defeat a monster like that? Even with the help of three determined redbreast robins with awfully sharp claws, he still doubted they'd ever kill the Sorcerer. Horrible, disturbing images flashed through his mind as he absently listened to Heather's sad story. “ . . . a-and he took us to his castle,” Heather said shakily, desperately fighting back the tears. Her voice cracked. “And he—he turned us into b-birds and I never—I never saw my p-parents since then,” she stuttered miserably. “I miss them. Badly.”

Tyler knew how she felt. He'd had the same uneasy feeling when he'd had his first sleepover at his best friend Timothy's house. He'd lay in his bright green mattress all night, unable to get any sleep because he missed his parents so much. He was only seven then, and it was difficult for him to last even a day without his beloved parents. Even now, at twelve, he still felt slightly uneasy without his mother and father. Maybe he would've also shed a tear or two if he had been taken away from his parents like Austin, Henry, and Heather had.

Chapter Four

The Black Castle

The farmland seemed to stretch endlessly across the landscape. For almost an hour, Tyler saw nothing but a carpet of light green spread out below him, dotted with little red-and-white patterns of farms and ranches with an assortment of noisy animals mooing and neighing and “baa”-ing and clunking in the brightly colored barns. There were little farmers and ranchers in their plaid long-sleeved shirts and battered straw hats digging away in their fields with their metal shovels, wiping drops of perspiration from their wet foreheads. Tyler watched a group of young red-headed children running around happily, chasing each other and sprinting all over the fields with their barking, yapping black-and-white sheepdogs following them obediently. He saw an older girl about the same age as him riding on a galloping snow-white horse, with her long, flaming-red pigtails flying out behind her like two thick ropes billowing in the wind. There was a boy in worn-out overalls wearily milking a patient cow, and a middle-aged woman fussing over a tearful little child whose knee had been grazed badly. The sight reminded Tyler of home, and he felt a pang of misery at the thought of his family. He'd probably never see them again.

Tyler sighed dismally. He gazed at the endless landscape of green below him, and let his bright blue eyes travel back and forth over the well-kept fields below him belonging to the many farmers and ranchers. A chubby oversized black hog squealed loudly in a pigsty, and a young farmer boy glanced curiously at it before setting a dirty trough filled with scraps of food in front of the hungry animal. Tyler watched it bury its short, rounded snout into the slops and lap up the food with its pink tongue like a starving puppy that hadn't eaten in days. Disgusted, Tyler made a face and shifted his gaze to a sweaty farmer with perspiration pouring down his face and soaking his tattered clothes. He dug a mud-stained metal shovel into the rich soil and lifted out a clump of dirt. Wiping his forehead with his sleeve, he dumped aside the dirt and continued to dig.

And then suddenly, the green fields came to an abrupt end, and a misshapen, broken barbed wire fence marked the ending of the farmland. A large, bright green forest with clumps of melting snow clinging to the leafy branches of the trees now lay beneath Tyler and the others. Small, colorful flowers with delicate petals were beginning to bloom on the trees. Tyler caught quick glimpses of wildlife beneath the canopy of leaves—racoons, mostly. There were millions of stripy racoons darting between the trees, flicking their bushy tails and staring around with their large, bright eyes. Birds fluttered from treetop to treetop, chirping and twittering loudly. In a little clearing there was a tall baby blue hotel with creamy white windowsills and a neon green rooftop. “Oh, that's the hotel we stayed in!” Heather said suddenly, her eyes growing large with a mixture of delight and sadness. “It's very colorful, isn't it?”

Tyler nodded absently. His eyes swept briskly over the forest, carefully scanning it for that accursed castle where the dreaded Great Sorcerer lived. Strangely, he didn't see the Black Castle, or the Sorcerer. Tyler frowned quizzically and let his blue eyes travel slowly over the forest, this time searching more closely. Still, he couldn't see the castle. All he could see was a huge, empty clearing lying uselessly in the middle of the forest.

“There it is,” Henry announced dramatically, pointing to the empty clearing. “The Sorcerer's Black Castle!”

Puzzled, Tyler stared curiously at the clearing. He didn't see anything. “What?” he demanded. “I don't see the castle.”

Austin smiled mysteriously. “You'll see it soon enough.”

All four of them briskly swooped down and landed gracefully on the floor of the huge clearing, the crisp dry brown leaves and crackly twigs rustling and snapping beneath their claws. Heather gritted her teeth angrily and glowered at the empty clearing all around them, her usually pleasant face twisted into a furious scowl. “I hate this place,” she muttered disdainfully. Tyler glanced at her questioningly. He wondered if she didn't like nature.

Heather whirled around and stalked off resentfully, picking her way through the clearing cautiously as if she were walking through a haunted graveyard. She trotted over to an old, withered weeping willow tree, gave it a scornful glance, and disappeared under the tree's low-hanging, lifeless branches. Through the yellow leaves Tyler could see Heather deftly stroking the willow's thin trunk, whispering a soft chant to the tree in a language Tyler had never heard of. Her voice was quiet and the words she spoke were barely audible, but Tyler could sense the power in them—the *evil* power.

When she finished chanting, Tyler heard Austin and Henry utter a collective gasp behind him. He whirled around curiously to see what all the fuss was about, and stumbled back in surprise.

Towering majestically over them was an enormous castle that sparkled and gleamed brightly in the sunlight. It was armed protectively with large gun turrets perched atop the high towers and was made entirely of some sort of hard black rock that felt cold against Tyler's fingers despite the blazing hot sun hovering in the air above them. There was a narrow gravel path leading up to the large oak doors and a giant stone statue of a snarling dragon with bared fangs that glared ferociously down at Tyler. The castle was beautiful, but just like Heather's chant Tyler could sense its evil.

Tyler swiftly brushed a strand of blond hair out of his wide-open eyes and stared unblinkingly at the castle in awe. He reached out timidly and traced his wing cautiously along a crack in the black rock, then quickly yanked his hand back, afraid the castle might explode at his touch. "Is this the Black Castle?" he whispered hoarsely to Austin.

"Yeah," Austin breathed back. "The castle is usually invisible so nobody can see it except for the people inside it, but Heather figured out a chant that makes the Black Castle visible."

Tyler glanced nervously at the Black Castle. An icy cold chill of fear traveled down his spine at the thought of the bloodthirsty Sorcerer.

Heather silently emerged from the willow tree's wall of lifeless brown leaves. She glared resentfully at the Black Castle with a look of pure hatred in her beady black eyes, then squawked disdainfully and snatched up a large stick from the ground. "Listen here," she hissed at the others, struggling to hold the heavy stick in her tiny wings. "We're going to smash the window and break into the castle. Then we kill the Sorcerer." She glanced briefly at her other three companions. "Is that understood?" she demanded. Without waiting for a reply, Heather shoved the stick into Tyler's wings and instructed, "Tyler, smash that window there next to the doors."

Reluctantly, Tyler clutched the stick tightly in his wings and roughly jabbed it at the freshly-washed window to the left of the oak doors. The stick bounced harmlessly off the clear glass. Tyler gripped the stick more firmly and again whacked the windowpane mercilessly. This time the window shattered in an explosion of pointy broken glass which rained down painfully on Tyler and pierced his skin with their sharp, jagged edges. Ignoring the stinging, bleeding cuts all over his face and body, he eagerly peered through the window, but the room inside was dimly lit and he could hardly see anything through the gloom. He pulled his head back out and looked expectantly at his other three companions. "Well?" he said. "I smashed the window. Let's go."

Chapter Five

The Sorcerer

Tyler and the others clambered cautiously through the window, tumbling onto the cold, hard floor. Tyler scrambled to his feet and strained his eyes to see through the murky darkness, but the room was pitch black except for a few flickering candles off to the right that seemed to be floating in midair. "Where's the light switch?" he demanded as he groped around blindly. His voice echoed hollowly through the room.

"Keep your voice down!" hissed Heather, smacking a feathery wing over Tyler's mouth. "And there is no light switch!"

Tyler gave a muffled protest and roughly shoved Heather's wing away from his mouth, furiously spitting out a soggy black feather. "What do you mean there is no light switch?" he demanded, sweeping a strand of honey-blond hair behind his ear and frowning quizzically.

Heather rolled her eyes irritably. "I mean there is no light switch because there is no *light*, stupid!"

"No light? How are we supposed to see?"

Suddenly, Tyler felt a bony, waxy hand grip his left shoulder painfully, and he instinctively shoved the gnarled hand off his shoulder, twisting around to find a hideous, sunken face glaring cruelly at him. Behind a curtain of stringy, matted black hair, sightless empty eye sockets stared wickedly at Tyler. A long, narrow scar had been carved deeply across the crooked, beaked nose, and thin, papery pale white skin was stretched tightly over visible white bones. Tyler instantly knew who this skeletal face belonged to: the Great Sorcerer.

For a moment the four companions stared at the Sorcerer in shocked silence; then Heather let out a frightened shriek and sprinted off wildly, her sharp claws scrabbling noisily on the slippery marble floor. Tyler, Austin, and Henry glanced at each other helplessly and then quickly fluttered after her, flapping their wings swiftly. The Sorcerer bellowed a string of curses and furiously thundered after them.

Tyler could see the shadowy silhouette of Heather scrambling unsteadily across the slick polished marble floor, twittering fearfully. Tyler gracefully soared after her, with Austin and Henry fluttering hurriedly beside him. He could hear the rhythmic sound of the Sorcerer's heavy footsteps behind him. Austin flicked an anxious glance behind his shoulder, his glittering black eyes revealing his fear and desperation. "Heather!" Austin hollered urgently. "Go to the weapon room!" He shifted his attention to the others. "Let's follow her."

"Austin, we're dead meat," Tyler said.

"Exactly," Austin replied. "Now, hurry, follow Heather!"

Chapter Six

The Plan

When the four companions arrived at the weapon room, Heather gingerly placed a feathery wing on the brass doorknob and yanked the heavy oak doors open. Saucer-eyed, Tyler stared unblinkingly into the vast room inside. A delicate crystal chandelier hung elegantly from the ceiling, its half-melted candles flickering with a faint light. *At least this room is lighted*, Tyler thought. Huge, handmade wooden shelves lined the creamy-white walls, towering eerily above Tyler and the others. On each shelf lay all sorts of freshly-polished battle supplies—armor, swords, knives, daggers, shields, and other strange, deadly-looking weapons. “The weapon room,” Heather breathed dramatically.

The four companions briskly strode inside the room. Heather gripped the brass doorknob firmly and carefully tugged the two creaking, stubborn wooden doors shut. “Okay,” she whispered breathlessly, her sparkling, fearful black eyes staring wildly at Tyler and the others. “We need to figure out a plan.” She glanced expectantly at Tyler. “You,” she instructed sharply. “Any ideas?”

“Um . . .”

“Distraction?” Austin suggested helpfully.

“Hmm,” Heather mused thoughtfully. “That’s a good idea. . . .”

Chapter Seven

Kill the Sorcerer!

Their plan went wrong instantly.

The four of them burst determinedly out of the weapon room, a three-foot-long steel sword clutched tightly in Tyler’s trembling, sweaty hands and a heavy, tight-fitting helmet perched clumsily atop his head. Daintily straightening his unsteady helmet and briefly shoving a strand of stringy, straw-colored hair out of his eyes, Tyler peered around nervously and, seeing no sign of the bloodthirsty Sorcerer, glanced reassuringly at the others. They crept forward cautiously, Austin threateningly holding his mini pistol with toothpicks for ammo.

Suddenly, Heather's high-pitched, piercing shriek echoed sharply through the castle. Alarmed, Tyler glanced around wildly, then he hurriedly sprinted to her side. "The Sorcerer!" she squawked helplessly. "The Sorcerer! I saw him!"

"What? Where?" Tyler demanded urgently. "Where? I can't see through this infernal darkness!"

A razor-sharp sword pricked Tyler's back painfully. "I'm right here," murmured a raspy and unpleasantly familiar voice.

Tyler choked back a scream and stood there petrified, not knowing what to do. The sword nearly clattered out of his sweaty hands.

Tyler glanced nervously at his sword. Then he abruptly whirled around and swung it furiously. He decided that if he was going to die—and he almost certainly would; the four of them would not stand a chance against this dastardly sorcerer—he would die a heroic death. Tyler's shiny metal blade viciously cut a deep gash in the Sorcerer's already scarred face. Crimson-red blood spewed from the wound, trickling rapidly down the Sorcerer's cheek and splattering onto the marble floor. The Sorcerer bellowed thunderously in rage and, without even bothering to wipe the blood from his cheek, seized his deadly sword, which was plated with gold and was two feet longer than Tyler's. His confidence lost, Tyler stared helplessly up at the glittering golden blade and fearfully shrank back against the wall, his penetrating blue eyes silently pleading with the Sorcerer's empty, hollow sockets.

The Sorcerer smiled toothily. "Oh, you can beg all you want; that won't stop me from killing you," he muttered, advancing hungrily toward Tyler, his sword pointed threateningly at the pleading child.

"Tyler, wake up!"

Suddenly, Tyler heard a vaguely familiar voice calling him, and confused, he stared around curiously as the Sorcerer, his three companions, and the darkness all around him blurred and slowly faded.

"What's going on? Austin? Heather? Henry?" he cried desperately.

His eyelids fluttered open groggily and he found himself looking up his smiling mother, her blonde, shoulder-length hair lusciously tumbling down the sides of her head and tickling his face. “Mom?” he murmured sleepily. “What—where . . . where are they?”

“What are you talking about, honey?” Mrs. Jackson said affectionately. “Where’s who?”

“The—the Sorcerer . . . and Austin, and—and Heather . . .”

“The Sorcerer?” Mrs. Jackson let out a sort of golden laugh. “Have you been reading too many Harry Potter books?”

“N-no, I—”

“Come on, Tyler, it’s breakfast time.”

Tyler glanced at his arms. “I don’t have wings.”

“Wings?” Mrs. Jackson demanded amusedly. “Honey, you never had wings. Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, I’m—I’m fine. . . .” Tyler frowned, and then burst out laughing as he realized it had all just been a crazy dream.