"Bursts with technicolour." **Jasbinder Bilan**

MAGICALIA

Thief of Shadows

JENNIFER BELL

“Fun, fast and ferociously readable.”
Elle McNicoll

“A super-exciting and unputdownable story.”
Thomas Taylor

“A proper rip-roaring adventure!”
Dominique Valente

“A spellbinding read.”
Rachel Chivers Khoo

“An absolute tour-de-force.”
Justin Somper

“A monstrously fun adventure.”
Andy Sagar

“A 2024 must read.”
Swapna Haddow

“True magic.”
Sarwat Chadda

“A gloriously imaginative and thrilling adventure.”
Lizzie Huxley-Jones

“Wonderful … bursts with technicolour.”
Jasbinder Bilan

“A bold and exciting new world of magic.”
Amy Sparkes

“Spectacular! A world-beating feat of imagination.”
Sinéad O'Hart

“Jennifer Bell makes the impossible seem possible … an absolute triumph!”
Mel Taylor-Bessent

For Mum

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published in the UK 2025 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2025 Jennifer Bell
Cover and interior illustrations © 2025 David Wyatt

The right of Jennifer Bell to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd,
36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland.
EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

This book has been typeset in Sabon MT Pro

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0745-4

www.walker.co.uk

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C171272

MAGICALIA

Thief of Shadows

JENNIFER BELL

WALKER
BOOKS

— WAYWURM —

FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF BITSY WILDER

CONJURING ESSENTIALS:

Magicores – strange creatures with unique powers. Every species is conjured from a different source emotion that shapes its behaviour, appearance and abilities.

Magicore Type – Species are grouped into six types:

Armourer magicores are red-eyed and have a remarkable physical gift

Clairvoyant magicores are white-eyed and can influence the minds of others

Elemental magicores are blue-eyed and have the ability to control a particular force, energy or element

Metamorph magicores are yellow-eyed and are talented at transformations

Weaver magicores are green-eyed and can craft remarkable objects

Hunter magicores are purple-eyed and skilled in seeking particular things

Farthingstone – a strange meteorite that landed on Earth thousands of years ago. It gives some people the power to conjure magicores.

Energy Level – Magicore species with more powerful abilities require more energy to conjure. There are five scaling energy levels:

ALPHA · BETA · GAMMA · DELTA · OMEGA

(Note: Omega-level magicores can only be conjured using Arkwright's Gyrowheel, an ancient magi-woven device crafted by Gilander Arkwright, founder of the Weaver Guild.)

Cosmodynamic – cosmodynamic people can use farthingstone to transform the energy in their bodies into magicores. Most people, however, are *cosmotypical*. For them, farthingstone is useless.

Conservatoire – a top-secret academy where cosmodynamic children, or initiates, are trained to be conjurors.

Guild – an organization of conjurors who use their skills to benefit humanity in secret. There are six guilds:

ARMOURER GUILD

Guild Colour: Red

Role: Security and transport

Headquarters: Red Citadel

Characteristics: Decisive, brave and proud

CLAIRVOYANT GUILD

Guild Colour: White

Role: Medicine and healing

Headquarters: Cloud Gardens

Characteristics: Thoughtful, kind and sensitive

ELEMENTAL GUILD

Guild Colour: Blue

Role: Science and exploration

Headquarters: Azure Institute

Characteristics: Curious, experimental and imaginative

METAMORPH GUILD

Guild Colour: Yellow

Role: Trade

Headquarters: Golden Palace

Characteristics: Flexible, quick-thinking and perceptive

WEAVER GUILD

Guild Colour: Green

Role: Art and engineering

Headquarters: Emerald Caves

Characteristics: Outgoing, creative and spontaneous

HUNTER GUILD

Guild Colour: Purple

Role: Espionage

Headquarters: Secret Barracks

Characteristics: Strong-willed, ambitious and loyal

— Xenom —

1

Bitsy's chair vibrated as a massive hatch opened in the middle of the laboratory floor, revealing a swirling vat of acid-yellow slime. The rest of the class sat in a tense circle around it, eyeing the slime warily.

"To become conjurors, you must learn to concentrate in high-pressure situations. This quiz will test how well you can focus." At the front of the laboratory, Professor Doyle tightened her fingers around a crescent brooch pinned to her navy overalls. The brooch glowed blue and Bitsy realized it must be made of farthingstone.

"What's she conjuring?" Bitsy's best friend, Kosh, hissed, peering over the tips of his trainers. "And what *is* that stuff?"

Bitsy had a horrible feeling it was some sort of

chemical. She surveyed the other twelve-year-old initiates, all inching back in their chairs. Everyone wore crash helmets and the same black conjuring overalls – like dungarees but made of a unique fireproof, waterproof and non-conductive fabric. "I'm not sure, but I think if we get the wrong answers in this quiz, we might find out."

Professor Doyle had one pair of safety goggles hanging around her neck and another poking out of her bushy brown hair, which was as wild and tangled as a bird's nest. Her eyes sparkled excitedly as a cloud of copper particles – *farthingdust* – spurted out of her brooch with a soft crackle. The farthingdust whirled through the air like a flurry of autumn leaves and, within seconds, transformed into a plump, four-legged creature with pinecone-shaped ears. The beast dropped onto the Professor's desk with a loud *thud*.

Goosebumps prickled along Bitsy's arms. It didn't matter how often she saw a magicore being conjured, it never failed to amaze her. This species looked a bit like a raccoon with a broad face, pointed snout and a long tail. Its stripy fur was metallic black and silver, growing in spiky tufts all over its body like a coat of iron filings. Its zigzag whiskers vibrated as it scurried around the Professor's desk, nosing through her apparatus.

"This is my xenom, Thermo," Professor Doyle announced, pulling a pencil out of her hair and pointing it

at Thermo's bottom. "Note the distinctive ring markings around his rear end. Xenoms are conjured from curiosity and have a multitude of skills."

Thermo lifted his head, his blue eyes glittering like sapphires. He wiggled his tail … and vanished into thin air. A moment later, he reappeared with one paw outstretched as if to say, *ta-da!*

A few initiates nervously applauded. As Thermo resumed snooping around the Professor's desk, Bitsy watched his pinecone ears pivoting like satellites probing for new signals. With his radar-like senses and inquisitive nature, she could see how his source emotion was curiosity.

"Question one," Professor Doyle said. "Like all magicores, Thermo can cast an illusion that turns him invisible. What is this illusion called?"

Bitsy confidently raised her hand, eager to answer. To her surprise, she noticed that everyone in the class had followed suit, except for one boy with spiky blond hair seated a few chairs to her left. Professor Doyle pointed to a girl with round glasses.

"It's called a *shade*," the girl said, glancing anxiously at the slime.

"That is correct!" Professor Doyle exclaimed. She waved her pencil like a conductor's baton, and Thermo's nose twitched. With a loud screech, the blond boy's chair

slid towards the hatch, tipped forward and dumped him head-first into the slime. He gave a gurgling cry as he disappeared under the surface.

Gasps and screams filled the room. "What happened to him?" Bitsy cried, tingling with shock.

"I assure you he's perfectly safe," the Professor replied with a mischievous grin. "He got slimed because he lacked confidence in his knowledge. In high-pressure situations, there is no room for hesitation. Now, watch carefully: xenoms can also defy gravity and move at incredible speeds."

With a flick of her pencil, Thermo leaped over the slime vat and gracefully strutted towards the ceiling as if climbing invisible stairs. Then, in a blur of black and silver, he pinballed from one side of the laboratory to the other, returning in a flash to the Professor's desk.

Everyone's jaws dropped open. Bitsy blinked and shook her head, feeling a dizzying mix of astonishment and worry. She flashed Kosh a lopsided grin. It was difficult to believe that just three months ago they hadn't even known magicores existed, and now they were training to be conjurors at the European Conservatoire of Conjuring. The conservatoire was only open on evenings, weekends and holidays, and if their other workshops were as thrilling as this, the rest of the summer holidays would be nothing short of amazing.

Professor Doyle tapped her pencil on the edge of her desk. “Every magicore species also has one unique ability. Your next question is: what is a xenom’s unique ability?”

As if on cue, Thermo’s fur bristled. All around the laboratory, objects started to move. A microscope slid across a workbench, a jar of thermometers toppled over, and a stopwatch tumbled off a shelf, clattering onto the floor. Everyone looked around twitchily at each other, desperate to raise their hands but uncertain what the answer was.

“Any idea what Thermo’s doing?” Kosh whispered.

Bitsy watched a paperclip in her reporter’s notebook slide to the edge of the page. “I’m not sure!”

They both jumped as the doors of a cabinet flew open at the back of the laboratory with a loud *bang*. The cabinet rattled and a blizzard of equipment came shooting out. Pipettes, spatulas and tongs went flying around the room. Scissors cartwheeled through the air, and batteries whizzed about like bullets. A few items plopped into the slime and disappeared under the swirling surface.

“Look out!” Kosh yanked on Bitsy’s arm, pulling her out of the path of a speeding Bunsen burner, its rubber hose flailing like a whip.

“Thanks,” she said, her pulse racing. “Hold on to your stuff!”

Initiates cried out as objects struck their helmets, and people started crawling under their chairs to take cover, careful to avoid falling into the slime. Under one chair, a freckly girl with round cheeks raised her hand. “Can xenoms move objects with their minds?” she guessed in a panic. “Like, telekinesis?”

“Good try,” Professor Doyle said, raising her voice above the racket. “But I’m afraid that’s incorrect!”

The girl’s chair suddenly zoomed forward, pulling her with it. She scrabbled to hold on to something but wasn’t fast enough, and the chair pushed her over the edge and into the slime. Before she could cry out, she was swallowed under the surface.

Bitsy’s chest tightened, hoping the girl was OK. As she and Kosh took shelter under their chairs, items rocketed from people’s unzipped bags. Mobile phones, stainless steel water bottles, pencil cases – even a Nintendo Switch – zoomed into the air and began spinning around the laboratory in a lethal vortex. Bitsy felt her new watch vibrating on her wrist and clamped her other hand over it so she didn’t lose it. Her dad had only given it to her for her birthday two days ago.

“Oi!” Kosh yelled as a bunch of keys flew out of his pocket. Dangling from them was a photo-keyring of a German shepherd called Elvis, who belonged to Kosh’s great-aunt. “Give those back!”

He scrambled out from under his chair and clambered on top, chasing them higher.

"Careful!" Bitsy cried as he swiped at his keys. "You might fall in!"

Sitting on the Professor's desk, Thermo was concentrating. His prickly eyebrows were drawn together in a deep V-shape, and a small blue tongue poked out the side of his mouth.

"Everybody, try to focus!" Professor Doyle called. "Pay attention to what is happening!"

Heart thudding, Bitsy studied the objects flying around the room. There were so many of them that it seemed odd they weren't colliding with each other. Whenever two items got close, they appeared to repel each other like…

Magnets.

That could be the answer! Bitsy didn't want to risk giving the wrong answer, but she also didn't want to stay quiet, as both options appeared to get you slimed. She cautiously raised her hand above the workbench, hoping not to get stabbed by a rogue compass.

"Yes?" Professor Doyle asked.

"The objects are behaving a bit like, uh…" Bitsy glanced at the slime, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Go on," Professor Doyle said, nodding encouragingly. "You can do it. Just apply the science."

Bitsy clung on to a chair leg just in case. “They’re behaving like magnets. So, perhaps xenoms have the power to control electromagnetic fields?”

Professor Doyle’s eyebrows jumped. For a heart-stopping moment, Bitsy thought she’d said the wrong thing. And then…

“Correct!” Professor Doyle cheered. “Thermo can generate and control energy in the electromagnetic range, allowing him to manipulate objects containing magnetic metals such as iron, nickel or cobalt.”

Bitsy relaxed her grip on the chair leg, sagging with relief. Suddenly, she felt her farthingstone pendant slip out from under the neck of her cardigan. She grabbed it as it levitated past her nose, and it glowed six colours under her touch – red, yellow, purple, blue, green and white – representing the six different types of magicore she could conjure. The pendant had once belonged to her mum, who had passed away when Bitsy was almost five. There was no way she was going to let Thermo take it!

“I won’t slime the rest of you if you all try to answer the next question,” Professor Doyle promised. “What is farthingstone made of?”

The initiates tried lifting their hands out from under their chairs, but it wasn’t easy with so many sharp objects whizzing around. They also struggled to keep hold of their farthingstones. Bitsy spotted one boy wrestling with

a farthingstone padlock, while under the chair beside him another boy juggled a farthingstone knitting needle.

"Gotcha!" Kosh said, finally catching his keys. His chair wobbled as he ducked to avoid a swooping calculator, and Bitsy tensed, worrying he might back-flop into the slime, but he quickly clambered down under his chair. When he saw the other initiates fighting to keep hold of their farthingstones, his face fell, and Bitsy felt a pang of sympathy, remembering he didn't have a farthingstone yet.

As Professor Doyle's gaze fell on him, Kosh hastily lifted his hand.

"Yes?" she said.

"Err, farthingstone is a stony-iron meteorite," he answered, shoving his keys into a Velcro pocket on his rucksack. "That's why it's magnetic."

The Professor smiled and signalled to a girl stretching to catch a farthingstone spanner as it floated out of her pocket. "Can you add anything else?"

The girl swallowed. "Farthingstone is composed of various minerals and metals, including a mysterious celestial element known as X-412, which allows us to conjure magicores."

Professor Doyle clapped. "Correct! You are showing brilliant focus, class! Do you see how beneficial working in a high-pressure environment can be?"

Bitsy flinched as something hit the seat of her chair. She wasn't sure she agreed with Professor Doyle's teaching methods, although she couldn't deny they were compelling.

A bell rang, making the glassware clink on the laboratory shelves. The walls trembled, and noise erupted in the corridor outside as initiates stampeded out of other laboratories.

"Sadly, that sound signals that our quiz is over!" Professor Doyle declared, winking at Thermo. The magicore's fur bristled, and the hatch in the middle of the floor closed with a long groan. Bitsy's chest relaxed as Professor Doyle hurriedly gathered her belongings and stuffed her pencil in her hair.

"Remember, you must attend my next *four* workshops to earn your *CONJURING THEORY* badge," the Professor said, scooping Thermo into her arms. With a swish of his tail, Thermo hopped onto her shoulder and settled around her neck like a fur shawl. "I have to dash now, so I'd be grateful if you could leave your helmets on your chairs and exit the laboratory swiftly."

As the Professor turned for the door, a small voice called, "What about our things?"

Professor Doyle glanced at the cyclone of flying laboratory equipment and personal effects. "Oh yes, collect your valuables before you go!"

Thermo's fur stood on end, and, as he and Professor

Doyle slipped through the door, every airborne item came crashing down.

Bitsy cowered as objects struck the chair above her head, sounding like a mighty hailstorm. Mobile phones smashed into the floor. Coins bounced off shelves. A screwdriver spun through the air and struck Kosh's trainer, making him yelp.

And then it was all over.

Nervous whispers filled the room.

"Are you OK?" Kosh asked breathlessly.

Bitsy nodded, although her heart was beating so fast she felt like it might explode out of her chest.

Grabbing their bags, they crawled out from under their chairs. The laboratory looked like a hurricane had swept through it. Shattered glass sparkled on the floor. Shelves had collapsed and broken apparatus lay strewn across every surface.

As the rest of the class began emerging from under their chairs, a door opened on one side of the room, and two bedraggled initiates staggered out, covered head-to-toe in yellow gunge. Bitsy recognized the boy with spiky blond hair.

"It's all right," he said with a dopey grin, wiping slime off his face. "It's only custard."

Kosh unbuckled the strap on his helmet. "Come on, let's escape now before this gets any weirder."

2

Outside the laboratory, the corridor buzzed with activity as initiates rushed between workshops, chatting and laughing. Bitsy knew they were speaking different languages, as initiates came here from all over Europe, but conservatoire entrances were magi-woven (crafted by magicores) and once you stepped through one, everything you heard was in your language. She fiddled with the rings on her reporter's notebook in her pocket. She had always wanted to be an investigative journalist like her mum and was itching to write about her experiences of the conservatoire, even if she couldn't share them with anyone cosmotypical.

"You'll get a farthingstone soon," Bitsy whispered encouragingly as she caught Kosh looking at the

farthingstone pen protruding from someone's pocket. "Dad said when an initiate doesn't inherit a farthingstone, the conservatoire lets them choose from a cache of spares in their first week."

Kosh kept his gaze low. "Still sucks that I'm the only one here without one. It makes me feel like … like I don't belong. It's bad enough that no one else in my family is a conjuror. At least, no one I can talk to."

Bitsy's stomach twisted, seeing how disappointed he was. Her mum, dad and aunt were all conjurors, but a recent DNA test had revealed that Kosh's closest cosmodynamic relative was his great-grandfather, Tavish Ranasinghe, who had passed away before Kosh was born. Neither of Tavish's children – Kosh's grandfather or great-aunt Ravi – had received positive cosmodynamics tests. The ability must have skipped two generations.

"You can talk to *me*," Bitsy said, wishing she could do something to make him feel better.

"Yeah, I know." Kosh smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Just then, a familiar voice rose above the noise in the corridor.

"Kosh, Bitsy, wait up!" A tall boy with curly dark hair and golden-brown skin weaved through the crowd towards them. He wore a *Stranger Things* T-shirt under his overalls and had a vintage camera slung across his chest.

“Mateo!” Bitsy’s heart lifted seeing their friend.

“How was your first workshop?” Mateo asked, throwing an arm around each of their shoulders. “Did you conjure any magicores?”

Kosh pulled on a beanie with the logo of his favourite football team, Oddingham FC. “No, but Professor Doyle dunked two initiates in custard and conjured a xenom who tried to steal my keys. Oh, and Bitsy almost got a concussion from a flying Bunsen burner, so … exciting?”

Mateo chuckled as they pushed through a door at the end of the corridor. “Sounds about right. I’ve never had a workshop with Professor Doyle, though. She must be new.”

His voice echoed as they entered the atrium, the stadium-sized hall at the centre of the conservatoire. Its gleaming marble floor and domed glass ceiling reminded Bitsy of the grand ballrooms in royal palaces. Balconies with polished brass railings scaled the walls, each slowly rotating in a different direction like machine cogs. Initiates bustled in and out of doors on every level, using spiral staircases and brass elevators to move between floors. Some were accompanied by magicores floating above their heads or scurrying at their feet.

“Yikes, that looks painful,” Kosh remarked as a pale girl with long braids hobbled past, holding an ice pack to her head. There was blood dripping down her cheek and

a nasty cut on her lip. A fluffy-haired woman wearing the white overalls of the Clairvoyant Guild, the healers of the conjuring world, escorted her through a door.

"So, how are your timetables looking?" Mateo asked cheerfully. "Bad luck if you've got RIDING LUBBERWHARLS on your first day. You'll be washing the smell out of your overalls for weeks."

Bitsy pulled a slim ring-bound diary out of her green leather satchel. The European Conservatoire of Conjuring logo – a galleon within a ring of seven silver stars – was printed on the front. She flipped to the second page, where a neatly typed schedule had been pasted. "I've got Studying Magicores with Master Ollennu at 1 p.m, followed by a flabberghast demonstration with Miss Wu at 3 p.m. It says: 'All times are given in SCT'. What does that mean?"

"SCT stands for Standard Conservatoire Time," Mateo explained. "Conservatoires are accessed via magi-woven entrances hidden in most major cities on the same continent. With people arriving from many different time zones, the conservatoires must operate on their own time so that staff and initiates can coordinate."

Kosh examined his timetable inside an identical ring-bound diary. "I've got something called *Chrysalides* in twenty minutes. It says to go to 3–18–TUNNEL. What does that mean?"

"That's the navigation code." Mateo gazed up at the rotating balconies. "The first number denotes the floor – there are thirty altogether. Each floor has twenty-five numbered doors – that's the second number in the code. The third reference is always a word, but you must determine what that means when you get there."

"Right…" Kosh rubbed his temples. "There's so much to remember."

Mateo smiled and gestured to two colourful badges sewn to the straps of his overalls. "It takes a while to get used to, but just think: once you get these boring badges for SAFE TRAINING and CONJURING THEORY, you can choose the workshops you take. I'm only half a term ahead of you, and next week I'm studying MAGICORE COMBAT, OZOZ RIDING and NARPHIN SURFING!"

Bitsy tingled with excitement, thinking of all the fun training to come. She knew that conjuring had an important purpose: working together as the Alliance, the guilds used magicores to make a positive difference in the cosmotypical world, pulling off daring rescues, pioneering new technologies and treating deadly diseases in secret. Cosmotypical people might not know about cosmodynamic people, but their two worlds had existed harmoniously for nearly four hundred years. Bitsy couldn't wait to be part of the Alliance, but after hearing Mateo's

stories about training with his magicores, she was looking forward to her time at the conservatoire even more.

"Right, I've got to go," Mateo said, checking his watch. "Meet you in the canteen for lunch? It's 10–20–SUN."

"Sure. We'll see you then." As Mateo strode off, Bitsy returned her conservatoire diary to her satchel. "My next workshop isn't for another two hours. Want me to help you find that chrysalides place?"

Kosh groaned with relief. "Yes, please."

Given that the navigation code for the chrysalides was 3–18–TUNNEL, and there was a queue to use the elevators, they climbed a spiral staircase to the third floor. Bitsy knew the floor was rotating, but the movement was so smooth she could barely feel it. Brass doors with porthole windows ran along the balcony, and although they were numbered, they weren't in order, so Bitsy and Kosh set off slowly, checking each door as they passed.

Walking on her tiptoes, Bitsy peered through some of the windows. Behind one, she saw an old-fashioned blacksmith's forge, flickering with flames; behind another was a dusty pottery studio, and behind another was a high-tech observatory filled with star charts and telescopes.

"No. Way," Kosh breathed, pressing his nose against the glass of another window.

Bitsy reeled at what appeared to be a nature reserve behind the door. Bullrushes swayed gently beside large

ponds traversed by wooden walkways. Initiates wearing black wetsuits and scuba masks were tramping about as curious forms bobbed in the water. Bitsy spotted a wooden sign near the entrance. “Wetlands,” she read. “Perhaps it’s used for aquatic magicores.”

As they continued along the balcony, a trio of girls brushed past Bitsy, laughing and murmuring. Bitsy squirmed, feeling their stares on the back of her head. “Have you noticed anyone looking at you funny?” she asked Kosh.

Kosh wore a hoodie under his overalls and pulled the sleeves past his wrists. “Once or twice, but it’s probably because everyone knows we fought Riddlejax.”

A chill traced Bitsy’s spine. Riddlejax was an experimental conjuror and all-round evil mastermind who had learned, amongst other things, how to shapeshift and keep himself alive for hundreds of years. He believed cosmodynamic people were superior to cosmotypical people and wanted to rule over them instead of helping them. Bitsy glanced over the railings at a circular desk in the middle of the atrium. Hanging from a rusty chain above it was the gyrowheel – a powerful magi-woven device with a farthingstone ball at its centre. Three months ago, Riddlejax and his followers had attacked the conservatoire to steal it. Only Bitsy, Kosh, Mateo and a handful of conservatoire staff had stood in their way.

"I suppose that might give us a reputation," she admitted, trying to push Riddlejax to the back of her mind. He'd managed to escape, and even though no one had heard from him since, Bitsy knew he wasn't the type to stay silent for long…

Kosh paused outside the next door, which was ominously dark. "Number 18. This is it."

He pulled the door open and they ventured into a dimly lit room about the size of a double garage. The floor was streaked with muddy tracks and an earthy smell hung in the air. An intricately designed wooden sleigh was parked on one side, with the opening to a dark tunnel opposite. The sleigh had to be magi-woven because green shoots were sprouting all over it like it was still growing.

"3–18–TUNNEL…" Kosh fiddled nervously with his cuffs as he stepped inside the tunnel. Soil crumbled down the walls as if it was freshly dug.

Deep inside, something rumbled.

Bitsy hesitated as Kosh peered into the darkness. The noise was getting louder; something was coming closer. "Get back!" she cried, grabbing Kosh's hood and pulling him away from the tunnel mouth as a six-legged magicore, the size of a hippo, came barrelling out. The creature's black snout was shaped like a giant shovel, and its round body was covered in grey armoured scales that framed its face. Bitsy and Kosh flattened themselves against the wall,

pulses racing, as the creature's curved claws scratched the floor. But instead of attacking them, it did an about-turn, swinging another wooden sleigh behind it, and settled itself, staring back into the dark tunnel.

A woman with windswept hair and mud-splattered aviator goggles rode in the front of the sleigh, holding a set of reins. Her crimson uniform was emblazoned with the Armourer Guild coat of arms: a red shield with a sword in the centre. "Koshan Ranasinghe?" she asked brusquely.

Kosh gulped and gave a small nod.

"Climb on board now, or else we'll be late," she ordered. The rider pulled a lever, and a gate swung open in the side of the sleigh, revealing two benches.

Bitsy tensed. Armourers were tough, decisive and fiery. It was one of the reasons that the Armourer Guild was responsible for security and transport in the conjuring world, in addition to rescue operations in the cosmotypical world. Still, this armourer's tone was more abrupt than the others they had met, and Kosh flashed Bitsy a panicked look.

"Come on," Bitsy whispered, nudging Kosh through the gate while the rider's back was turned. "I'll come with you."

As they settled beside each other on a bench, the rider called over her shoulder, "You might want to hold on to the safety rail!"

The safety rail was a disconcertingly flimsy bar, covered in cracking paint, fixed to the panel in front. Grabbing it with both hands, Bitsy had a horrible feeling she was about to scream.

The rider shook the reins, and the magicore kicked its six legs. Its scales rumbled like a tractor engine as the sleigh lurched forward, and they launched into the tunnel at breakneck speed.

Bitsy screamed.

3

"Ahhhhhhhh!" Bitsy's lips flapped like a windsock. Soil pelted her in the face as they thundered into the darkness.

"We're g-going to d-dieeeeeee!" Kosh yelled, his jaw juddering as the sleigh wobbled.

A hood of shimmering white haze suddenly materialized around the magicore's head and spread back over the sleigh like the roof of a convertible. Bitsy could no longer feel the wind or dirt, so she realized it must be some kind of transparent shield.

She glanced to either side. The tunnel walls were bare and disintegrating, with no structural supports to prevent them from collapsing. Briefly rising off her seat, she studied the magicore in front and realized it was clearing the tunnel as it ran, scooping away any loose

earth with its massive claws and tossing it behind.

With a gulp, Bitsy realized that the thin veil of light was all that was stopping them from being crushed to death beneath piles of loose dirt…

She clenched her buttocks as they hurtled over another bump in the tunnel floor, flying off her seat and landing back down with a painful thud.

"What s-s-species of m-magicore *is* this?" Kosh asked frantically.

Still clinging to the safety rail with one hand, Bitsy unfastened her satchel and pulled out *Magicalia*, an old encyclopaedia of magicore species that had once belonged to her mum.

In response to Kosh's question, the book's cover jumped open, and the gold-leafed pages whirred forward. It looked like the sheets were blowing in the wind, but Bitsy knew that the book was partly magi-woven and had a mind of its own.

Magicalia listed species alphabetically according to their source emotion. When the pages stopped moving somewhere in the "S" section, Bitsy slid the book onto the bench between her and Kosh so they could both read it:

shame
Mollowup
[*Armourer, beta-level*]

Weighing between twenty and thirty-five stone, the mollowup is a powerful magicore with long, sharp claws and a distinctive trowel-shaped muzzle. Its body is protected by tough armoured plates which vibrate when it moves, producing a low rumbling sound. Mollowups are the best burrowers in the magicore kingdom, capable of tunnelling miles underground at high speed. Every mollowup generates a uniquely shaped energy shield to protect itself from caving earth and avoid being crushed. Unlike other magicore species, mollowups can communicate with each other over long distances to prevent collisions when tunnelling.

Thinking of the mollowup's gloomy colouring and hooded face, Bitsy could see how its source emotion was shame. Shame made you feel regretful and embarrassed, like you wanted to hide deep underground.

Kosh glanced worriedly at the energy shield as he finished reading. "So, w-without this…"

Bitsy squeezed his arm for reassurance, although her insides were full of jitters.

The tunnel became layered with rock and clay. Bitsy had no idea how deep underground they were, but the air felt stuffy and warm. The sleigh's runners clattered over the uneven floor, sounding like they might break at any moment. Bitsy didn't usually suffer from motion sickness, but all the shuddering and bouncing started to make her regret her breakfast.

After several tense minutes, the rough tunnel walls gave way to smooth panels of iridescent glass that glimmered like giant opals. The mollowup's pace slowed, the air turned cooler and Bitsy felt the sleigh decelerate.

Up ahead, she spotted a film of white haze where the tunnel abruptly vanished. She and Kosh peeked anxiously at each other as they sped towards it. The rider pulled on the mollowup's reins, the magicore snorted and Bitsy squinted as they hurtled into the light…

…and emerged into a massive cavern that made the atrium feel like a sock drawer.

"What in the—?" Kosh spluttered.

The mollowup's energy shield disintegrated as they glided forward over a smooth floor. Every inch of the cavern was covered with petals of the same glowing milk-white glass as in the tunnel. Twisted staircases grew up from the cavern floor, supporting a vast terraced platform upon which Bitsy could see people moving around. Bitsy

counted six egg-shaped pods suspended between the ceiling and platform like strange treehouses.

"What *is* this place?" she breathed.

"The chrysalides, I guess," Kosh said, gawping. "Perhaps it's the plural of chrysalis? That must be what those big egg things are. In nature, they're what butterflies grow in. But I don't know what they've got to do with me…"

The mollowup slowed to a trot and eventually stopped beside a gated area where a selection of mollowup harnesses, reins and sleighs were neatly stored. Looking around, Bitsy saw armourer guards patrolling in groups, talking into strange silver radios. A couple had magicores with them that she'd encountered before. One was a hefty, scorpion-tailed beast with forty legs and at least as many eyes – a scutterflix conjured from panic. Another looked like a giant ball of red spikes with armoured crab legs that made a clickety noise against the glass – a thornsprout conjured from annoyance. Bitsy shivered as she looked at them – her previous encounters had been anything but pleasant. Mollowups and their riders zoomed across the cavern floor, in and out of five other tunnels. A sign on the wall beside each tunnel entrance displayed a wiggly shape, like a puzzle piece.

"Right on time," their rider called ahead. She pulled a lever and Bitsy heard a click as the gate beside her swung open.

Collecting their bags, she and Kosh staggered out of the sleigh. Once the gate was shut, the rider flicked the mollowup's reins, and the creature turned around, its scales vibrating as it moved. With a loud hum, the mollowup flexed its legs and charged off towards another tunnel.

"Is sleigh-sickness a thing?" Kosh asked, swaying. "Because I feel like I'm still zooming through that tunnel."

Bitsy took a few deep breaths to settle her stomach as a pale, bespectacled woman in mustard-yellow overalls hurried over to greet them. She had a neat, strawberry-blonde bob and was carrying a black briefcase.

"Chancellor Hershel!" Kosh exclaimed.

Bitsy blinked. She hadn't expected to see the head of the conservatoire there.

The Chancellor's cheeks flushed as she saw Bitsy. "Elizabeth Wilder? What are you doing here? I only invited Koshan."

"Err…" Bitsy shuffled her feet, trying to think what to say. She didn't want to get Kosh in trouble. "I was curious about the chrysalides, so I hitched along with Kosh. It's my fault. I'm sorry."

Sighing, the Chancellor glanced over her shoulder at a trio of approaching conjurors. "All right, just … let me do the talking."

As the trio drew closer, Bitsy smiled as she recognized Professor Doyle. She wore rubber wellington boots over

her chemical-splattered overalls like she'd just gone wading through the wetlands. Bitsy liked how eccentric Professor Doyle was; she reminded Bitsy of her dad, also an elemental. Thermo was nowhere to be seen. Bitsy remembered the Professor saying she had to dash off somewhere after their workshop – this must have been where. But why were they all in the chrysalides for Kosh?

The remaining two conjurors were strangers to Bitsy. One was a young man with dark-brown skin, a nose ring and shades. His slouchy green overalls hung off one shoulder, revealing a tight-fitting knitted vest. He'd teamed both with a pair of scarlet cowboy boots, one of which half-covered a below-knee prosthetic leg. The other conjuror was a terrifying man-mountain. Tall and broad-chested with bulging biceps and hands as large as dinner plates, he made Bitsy feel the size of a pea. His fierce iron-grey eyes were set under a heavy brow, and he had a wiry black beard and tanned, shaved head covered in red tattoos. He wore a rust-red tactical vest and armoured trousers with a silver radio clipped to his belt.

"You didn't say there would be two of them," he growled, his voice deep and gruff.

Chancellor Hershel grinned sheepishly. "There was a teeny mix-up – but I can vouch for them both, General. You have my word."

Bitsy shrank back as the General loomed over her and Kosh, folding his massive arms.

"I am General Tychon, the leader of the Armourer Guild. You are here with my permission."

They both gave hasty nods, too tongue-tied to speak.

There was an awkward silence and then Professor Doyle piped up, "General, this is Koshan Ranasinghe and Elizabeth Wilder. They were in my Conjuring Theory workshop not half an hour ago."

"Wilder…" The General glowered at Bitsy. "That makes you Melasina Spires' niece." He spat the name of Bitsy's aunt.

Bitsy wanted to shrink into her trainers. Her Aunt Melasina was the leader of the Hunter Guild, who, up until recently, had been banished from the Alliance for being thieves, spies and rule-breakers. Even though they were supposed to be working with the Alliance now, General Tychon had probably spent a lot of time fighting them.

Luckily, before another awkward silence took hold, the young conjuror stepped forward, his cowboy boots clicking against the glass floor. "I suppose I'll introduce myself, as no one else has bothered," he hissed irritably with a Spanish accent. "I am César Cortez."

He said his name like he expected Bitsy and Kosh to have heard of him, but they hadn't. Bitsy could tell from César's green overalls that he was a member of

the Weaver Guild. The guild comprised writers, artists, musicians and craftspeople, although she couldn't see any clues about César's person to suggest his vocation.

"Perhaps we should get a move on," Chancellor Hershel suggested. "There are urgent matters to attend to and we don't have long before…"

The General lifted his hand to cut her off. "It would be wise to say no more, given present company." He gave Bitsy another scowl and grunted. "Follow me."

4

The others moved aside as General Tychon did an about-turn and marched towards one of the twisted staircases that led to the terraced platform above. César Cortez eyed the General warily before stepping in line behind him and Professor Doyle. Chancellor Hershel walked alongside Bitsy and Kosh as they reached the staircase and started to climb.

Bitsy almost lost her footing as she gazed over the glass balustrade at the glowing cavern. It was so enormous and otherworldly, it didn't seem real.

"Spectacular, isn't it?" Chancellor Hershel remarked. "The cavern was excavated by mollowups and lined with indestructible glass crafted by proxiwigs. The chrysalides were built by proxiwigs, too. They're extraordinary

weaver-type magicores who make things out of stone, glass and sand."

"But what is this place used for?" Bitsy asked, wondering why Kosh had been summoned here. With so many armourer guards around, it had to be something important.

Chancellor Hershel glanced surreptitiously at her briefcase. "For many things, but mainly it's where conservatoires store their valuables. Inside the chrysalides are troves of historical documents, magi-woven artefacts and farthingstone treasures."

"Is that why there are six chrysalides?" Kosh guessed. "One for each conjuring guild?"

"Not for the guilds, but for the conservatoires," she replied. "The chrysalides are accessed through the tunnels you saw on the ground floor. Each one connects to a different conservatoire."

Bitsy's fingers twitched, desperate to reach for her notebook so she could write everything down. There were six conservatoires of conjuring in the world, one on every continent except Antarctica. She knew that the location of every conservatoire was top secret, but she hadn't realized they were all connected.

Kosh's expression tightened into a frown. "If this is such an important place, why did you invite *me* here?"

The corners of the Chancellor's mouth twitched. "To

choose your farthingstone. This is where the conservatoire stores all its spares. Most of them belonged to conjurors who passed away without heirs. Some of the items are very old."

Smiling, Bitsy elbowed Kosh. "I told you you'd get a farthingstone soon."

"Yeah." Kosh blinked, looking pleasantly surprised.

There was a commotion above as General Tychon and the others reached the top of the stairs. Kosh frowned at them. "I wonder why they're here? Surely I don't need that many people to help me choose?"

Bitsy was curious about that, too. Chancellor Hershel, General Tychon, César Cortez and Professor Doyle seemed like an odd group.

When Bitsy and Kosh reached the top of the stairs, two armourer guards joined the rear of their party. Bitsy noticed their silver radios shimmering with streaks of light. She'd seen objects like those before. They were magi-woven.

"Whoa. What is *that*?" Kosh asked, peering up.

They'd emerged near the centre of the vast terraced platform. The six glowing chrysalides were suspended around the edge and, in the middle, what looked like an enormous peach-coloured hot air balloon floated a few metres above the floor. Bitsy hadn't noticed it before because it had been hidden by the chrysalides, but as they

moved closer, she saw it was covered in fur. She spotted a pair of heavy-lidded yellow eyes and a toothless mouth hidden on its underside. “It’s a magicore – a bundler, I think.”

Bundlers were metamorph-type magicores conjured from boredom that could extend the boundaries of their personal shade, rendering nearby objects, people and areas completely invisible. Kosh had once conjured his own bundler, Frau Huber, named after Bitsy and Kosh’s boring German teacher, to hide them while they snuck around.

“I didn’t know bundlers could be that big,” Kosh said, keeping his voice low. “Frau Huber was only the size of a football. I wonder why it’s here…”

Bitsy scanned the area suspiciously. “A metamorph must have conjured it, but I haven’t seen anyone wearing yellow except the Chancellor.”

They proceeded up and over multiple terraces, following General Tychon past several chrysalides. Up close, the structures were as massive as a three-storey house and covered in overlapping petals of milky glass, like they’d been dipped in wedding confetti. Each chrysalis had a door shaped like one of the tunnel signs on the floor below. It took Bitsy a moment to realize that the signs hadn’t been puzzle pieces: they were the shapes of continents.

Narrow glass walkways connected each of the chrysalides to the central terraced platform. “Wouldn’t like to fall off one of those,” Bitsy commented, peering over the edge as they passed the African chrysalis.

“Everything about this place is designed with security in mind,” Chancellor Hershel stated. “The glass is indestructible, and each chrysalis can only be opened using a unique key. If anyone tried to steal anything, they would be marked by a proxipatch, a magi-woven device crafted, again, by proxiwigs.”

A line appeared on Kosh’s brow. “No one will think I’m stealing if I take a farthingstone, will they?”

“No, no. Everyone knows why you are here – and a proxipatch will only trigger if you take something that doesn’t belong to you.”

Up ahead, General Tychon, César Cortez and Professor Doyle stopped beside the walkway to the European chrysalis. “The key, Chancellor?” General Tychon asked sternly.

Chancellor Hershel tucked her briefcase under her armpit and fiddled with a chunky silver ring on the middle finger of her right hand. She twisted the ring a three-quarter-turn clockwise and a half-turn anticlockwise. The ring glimmered, and as the Chancellor turned her hand over, Bitsy saw a delicate glass spiderweb creeping across the Chancellor’s palm. It was shaped like the

continent of Europe, with silvery threads marking the boundaries of every country.

"*That's* a key?" Bitsy exclaimed.

"A unique key to fit a unique keyhole," the Chancellor replied. "Wait here."

As she crossed the narrow walkway, Bitsy wondered how the key worked. The glass web must somehow be contained inside the silver ring and would only appear if you twisted the ring with the right combination of turns.

The Chancellor placed her right hand against the chrysalis door. The key slotted into place with a soft *click*. The glass petals around the edge of the door unfurled, and the door slid away to reveal an entranceway shaped like the European continent.

"Koshan and Elizabeth, you can enter first," the Chancellor said, waving them inside with her briefcase.

Kosh glanced nervously at Bitsy before they shuffled past the other adults and walked carefully across the walkway. As Kosh stepped into the chrysalis, Bitsy noticed Chancellor Hershel twist her silver ring a quarter-turn anticlockwise and the glittering map of Europe on her palm disappeared.

Bitsy looked around curiously as she followed Kosh inside. The chrysalis was cramped with bookcases, old leather trunks and glass display cabinets filled with various ornaments, like in an antiques shop. The air

smelled faintly of incense, making Bitsy's nose twitch. A staircase at the back of the floor led up to another crowded area, while in small alcoves on the walls, hundreds of farthingstone items were on display, glittering like jewels in the pale light.

"Feel free to choose any farthingstone item on this level, Koshan," the Chancellor called from behind them.

Kosh scanned the walls apprehensively. "Bit weird choosing from a bunch of dead people's stuff," he muttered to Bitsy.

"You never know; some of these items might have belonged to your ancestors hundreds of years ago," she said, trying to put him at ease. "Come on; I'll help you look."

She glanced over her shoulder to ask Chancellor Hershel if they could open the cabinets, only to find General Tychon filling the doorway. She swallowed as he gave her an icy stare before plodding inside. Professor Doyle, César Cortez and Chancellor Hershel swiftly followed, leaving the chrysalis door open behind them. The two armourer guards stood outside, keeping watch.

Trying to ignore General Tychon, Bitsy surveyed the alcoves in the wall. Amongst the items on display were a farthingstone spanner, a tiara and a hand-held mirror.

"I advise you to choose something bold, Koshan," César said, leaning back with one cowboy boot against the wall behind him. He tapped his nose ring and it

shimmered green, revealing it was made of farthingstone. "You'll have to carry it with you for the rest of your life, so it might as well be stylish."

Chancellor Hershel gestured to the farthingstone frames of her glasses. "Or you could choose something practical *and* stylish."

"There's a fascinating collection of trinkets in here," Professor Doyle commented, squinting through the glass in a cabinet. "You're lucky, Koshan. If you had inherited a farthingstone, like I did my brooch, you wouldn't get to choose at all."

General Tychon stood with his arms crossed and feet apart like a statue in the corner, watching and saying nothing.

Kosh picked up several items and almost immediately put them down again.

"What about that?" Bitsy asked, pointing to a tarnished compass with a farthingstone bezel. It was housed in a crumbling leather case and had a cool needle shaped like a kraken.

"Nah." Kosh screwed up his face. "Too old."

She held up a doll with farthingstone eyes. "This?"

"Too … creepy," Kosh said.

He strolled around the floor, weaving between chests and boxes until something in a glass case caught his eye. He opened the lid and pulled out a farthingstone whistle

attached to a silver chain. He scrutinized the whistle, turned it over in his hands, held it to his lips and blew into it. The sound reverberated inside the chrysalis.

"It's just like a referee's whistle," he realized, smiling.

Static buzzed over General Tychon's radio. They all turned to him as he reached for the device on his belt, but before he could use it, the chrysalis walls darkened and everything went pitch black.

"Bitsy?" Kosh called, his voice unsteady. "What's happening?"

"I … don't know." Bitsy squinted into the darkness, but all she could see were hulking shadows. She heard footsteps and shivered as she felt the air move beside her.

Almost as quickly as they had darkened, the walls lit up again. Everyone was standing in the same positions as before. Bitsy frowned. Someone had definitely been moving around…

A siren wailed outside, sending tremors through Bitsy's chest and scrambling her thoughts.

Two armourer guards rushed in, looking sweaty-faced and pale. General Tychon lifted his chin.

"We're under attack!" one of them spat. "In the South American tunnel. They've disabled our communications."

Chancellor Hershel paled. "Who has?"

"We believe…" the second guard glanced warily at General Tychon. "We believe it's the *Shadowsmith*."

5

"The Shadow—!" César's foot slipped against the wall, and he almost fell over.

"The Shadowsmith can't be here." Professor Doyle shook her bird's nest hair in disbelief. "The chrysalides are the most secure place in the entire conjuring world!"

General Tychon's jaw stiffened as he addressed the guards. "Re-route mollowup riders back to the cavern. Barricade the tunnels. Whatever happens, do *not* let the Shadowsmith escape. This could be our chance to catch them finally."

"But General…" The first guard shuffled his feet. "Two teams are under attack in the South American tunnel and another three on the cavern floor. There's barely enough of us to defend the chrysalides."

César went rigid. “Well, someone’s got to do something because I am *not* dying here!”

Bitsy’s pulse quickened as she tried to follow what they were saying. She didn’t understand how all those guards could be under attack from just one person. “What’s going on? Who’s the Shadowsmith?”

As General Tychon rushed outside, Kosh squeezed the farthingstone whistle. “Will someone please explain!”

Chancellor Hershel’s expression hardened. “The Shadowsmith is a dangerous thief who has found a way to weaponize darkness, wielding lethal shadow-forms strong enough to slice through rock.”

“They wear a hooded cloak as a disguise,” Cortez added in an unsteady voice. “The Alliance suspects they are a clairvoyant because the only magicore known to generate darkness is an awloss, a clairvoyant-type.”

“They’ve committed multiple thefts in the cosmotypical world in the last year that the Alliance has had to cover up,” Professor Doyle chimed in, her face fraught with worry. “At the scene of every crime, they leave a chaosphere.”

Bitsy’s stomach wobbled as she looked at the chrysalis walls, feeling unsafe. The chaosphere was the symbol of chaos-conjurors – loyal followers of Riddlejax. Devious and cruel, they hid in plain sight,

masquerading as regular Alliance conjurors while carrying out Riddlejax's orders. Bitsy had encountered two chaos-conjurors in the flesh; one had betrayed her, and the other had tried to kill her.

"But why is the Shadowsmith *here*?" Kosh fretted. "What do they want?"

"I'm not sure," the Chancellor said, her fingers tightening around the handle of her briefcase, "but whatever it is, they must be stopped."

The chrysalis floor trembled as General Tychon returned inside, his cheeks flushed. "We need more support. Now."

Chancellor Hershel's brow set with a determined frown. "I've had combat training and battled chaos-conjurors before. I can help."

"And I'll do what I can," Professor Doyle said, swallowing sharply.

General Tychon turned to César Cortez. "What about you?"

César Cortez opened his mouth like he wanted to protest but closed it again under General Tychon's fierce glare. "Fine. But if I die, and you all survive, you'd better wear something *devastating* to my funeral."

As the others hurried outside, Chancellor Hershel stashed her briefcase behind a red leather trunk with rusted iron clasps. "You two wait here. Once I shut this

door, the key is the only way to open it from either side. You'll be perfectly safe."

Worries spiralled through Bitsy's mind as Chancellor Hershel hurried to the door. She was fretting so much that she almost didn't notice that, as the Chancellor slipped outside, the silver ring containing the chrysalis key was missing from around her finger.

"Chancellor, your ke—!" Bitsy called.

But she was too late. The Chancellor shut the door with a definitive *click*. Bitsy felt the air pressure shift as she and Kosh were sealed within.

"Did you see her finger?" Bitsy said to Kosh. "She wasn't wearing the chrysalis key!"

"Well if *she* doesn't have it, who does?" Kosh asked, alarmed.

"I don't know…" Bitsy shivered. Despite the Chancellor's assurance, she got the feeling they were far from safe.

Even with the door shut, they could hear the siren wailing outside. The chrysalis shuddered, and they both grabbed on to something to steady themselves. "The Chancellor said this glass is indestructible, right?" Kosh said.

"Uh-huh." Bitsy swallowed down a bubble of fear as a dark silhouette swept over the chrysalis. Memories of battling Riddlejax swirled through her mind. "Do you

think, maybe, Riddlejax is the Shadowsmith?"

"It wouldn't make sense," Kosh said. "Why would Riddlejax wear a hooded cloak to disguise himself when he can shapeshift into anyone he wants?"

Bitsy suspected Kosh was right, although it didn't make her feel better.

Riddlejax had caused the car accident that had led to her mum's death. He didn't care who he hurt to get what he wanted. If the Shadowsmith was a chaos-conjuror, then whatever they were up to, Riddlejax had planned it – which meant something terrible was about to happen.

"It's so frustrating not being able to do anything," Kosh said. "We can't even see what's going on."

Bitsy glanced at her satchel. "Maybe there's a magicore species we can conjure that might help?"

She slid *Magicalia* out of her satchel and the book flew open so violently that she almost dropped it.

As if sensing the danger they were in, it whirled through the first few pages until a shining, gold-leafed capital A sat at the top of the paper. Bitsy rested the encyclopaedia on top of a cabinet to examine it:

agitation
HUFFLUFF
[*Armourer, gamma-level*]

The huffluff is an extremely fidgety magicore with a flat, rectangular body that goes limp when the huffluff is frightened. Its eyes, ears, nose and mouth are located on its smooth, rose-pink underside, while its back is covered in a layer of wiry grey hair. The huffluff is a graceful flyer, even whilst carrying extraordinary weight on its back. Due to its restless nature, it never stays in one place for too long.

"There isn't much room to fly around in here, so I don't think that can help us," Kosh said. "Plus, it's a gamma-level. That's way beyond what you and I can conjure."

Bitsy nodded. Conjuring consumed energy within a conjuror's body, and magicore species with more powerful abilities required more energy to conjure. There were five scaling energy levels – alpha, beta, gamma, delta and omega. So far, Bitsy had only conjured alpha and beta-level magicores, and there were only so many times she could conjure those before she needed to rest. She was still learning what her limits were. She tapped her finger against the next entry. "What about this?"

amazement
Lorple
[*Hunter, beta-level*]

The lorple is a furry beast weighing between thirteen and twenty pounds. It is quiet and slow-moving, with long arms and legs. The lorple has the largest eyes of any species of magicore, and its vision can penetrate materials as dense as lead. Like all hunter species, it is excellent at tracking and has a particular gift for hunting knowledge. Wild lorples have been known to gather on hilltops with beautiful vistas.

Kosh raised his eyebrows. "This must be what *Magicalia* wanted us to conjure. If its vision can *penetrate materials as dense as lead*, it might be able to see through the chrysalis and tell us what's going on?"

"It's worth a shot." Bitsy glanced at the door to check it was still secure, before turning to study the text. "A lorple's source emotion is *amazement*. Can you think of a time in your life when you felt amazed?"

Slowly, a smile swept across Kosh's face. "The first time we rode an ozoz – soaring up through the clouds with London growing smaller below us. It was unbelievable! What about you?"

Bitsy thought carefully. Amazement was the giddy wonder you felt when you learned something incredible, witnessed something mind-bending, or saw something that left you speechless. "The first time I touched a magicore," she decided, a warm feeling spreading through her chest as she thought of her dad's waywurm, Quasar. As she reached under her cardigan for her farthingstone pendant, a loud bang sounded outside the chrysalis, making her jump.

"What was that?" Kosh hissed.

"I'm not sure…" Bitsy said, jitters filling her stomach. "We'd better conjure as quick as we can. Are you going to use that whistle?"

Kosh briefly considered the football whistle, then pulled the chain over his head. "Yeah, why not? It's kind of cool."

"All right, then." Bitsy tightened her grip on her mum's pendant. "Ready?"

Kosh clasped his whistle. "Let's do this."

Closing her eyes, Bitsy tried to immerse herself in the memory of her encounter with Quasar. She pictured Quasar's silver caterpillar body, neon-blue eyes and squidgy antenna. She recalled his fresh, metallic smell like rainwater and the humming noise he made as he whizzed through the air. She remembered how her scalp had tingled when she touched him and the feeling of wonder that had bubbled up inside—

The chrysalis suddenly quaked, breaking Bitsy's concentration. She shook her head and tried to focus, but the siren was still wailing, and now she could hear muffled shouts.

She opened her eyes … to find a glittering cloud of farthingdust swirling around Kosh. The cloud stopped moving by his feet and settled into the shape of a small monkey-like creature with round ears, a long tail and incredibly long limbs. As the farthingdust evaporated, Bitsy gasped. The lorple had the most amazing eyes she had ever seen – lavender-purple and as shiny and round as bowling balls. The magicore's velvety fur was light brown with flecks of blue, and it had dainty-fingered hands and feet. It blinked and walked closer to Kosh with slow, elegant strides.

"Hello there, little lady," Kosh said, bending down to tickle his lorple under the chin.

The lorple purred and rotated her head 360 degrees like an owl. It was a bit off-putting watching Kosh chase her chin with his fingers, but it certainly wasn't the weirdest thing Bitsy had seen a magicore do.

Kosh chuckled. "Bitsy, allow me to introduce you to *Unbubbalievable*."

"Lovely to meet you," Bitsy said hastily, bowing towards Unbubbalievable. "Sorry, but I couldn't concentrate long enough to conjure my lorple – not with this racket going on."

"That's all right. Unbubbalievable should be able to help us on her own."

Despite her incredibly slow pace, Unbubbalievable seemed eager to explore. She clambered onto Kosh's trainers and up one of his legs, her long limbs like mountaineer's walking poles.

Shadows swept around the chrysalis, making Bitsy and Kosh huddle closer together. "I conjured you because we need your help," Kosh quickly explained to Unbubbalievable. "There's a dangerous thief here – the Shadowsmith – and people are in trouble. We need you to let us know what's happening outside."

Unbubbalievable grappled the pockets of Kosh's overalls with her long fingers, pulling herself up to his chest. Furrowing her brow, she turned her head 180 degrees and stared at a section of the chrysalis wall.

"Can you see the Shadowsmith?" Bitsy asked fearfully.

Unbubbalievable's neck tensed. She pointed up and over the chrysalis, tracing a path with her dainty finger.

"The Shadowsmith must be on the move," Kosh realized, a wobble in his voice. "What about the others? Chancellor Hershel has short strawberry-blonde hair and yellow overalls. Can you see her?"

With a swing of her long tail, Unbubbalievable jumped around to Kosh's back and stared at a different part of the wall. She pointed in the direction of another chrysalis.

"How about General Tychon?" Kosh puffed up his chest and curled his biceps. "He's big and scary like this and wears a red uniform."

Unbubbalievable moved her head in a circle, gazing all around. Looking down, her whiskers flinched and she pointed at the chrysalis floor.

"He's underneath us," Bitsy guessed. "They must have split up."

She pictured the scene outside. There had been at least twenty armourer guards milling around on the cavern floor when they'd arrived, plus another ten or so on the platform. That meant the Shadowsmith was outnumbered by thirty to one… Bitsy shuddered. Just how powerful was this thief?

Unbubbalievable's fur stood on end and she started jumping up and down, pointing in alarm at the chrysalis door.

"Oh no, someone's coming!" Kosh realized. "I don't think they're friendly – hide!"

With Unbubbalievable clinging to his chest like a baby chimpanzee, he squeezed behind an oversized ottoman close to the wall. Shoving *Magicalia* back in her satchel, Bitsy shimmied in beside him, her heart pounding.

The chrysalis walls darkened. With a squeak of terror, Unbubbalievable vanished into thin air, although Bitsy could still see her imprint against Kosh's overalls. The

sounds of battle blasted into the chrysalis – beastly roars, shouting and the clash of strange weapons. Trembling, Bitsy peered out from behind the ottoman.

The chrysalis door was wide open and lights flashed outside. Bitsy's throat went dry as a cloaked figure stepped into the chrysalis. They were over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and thick black gloves covering their chunky fingers – at least, they were for a moment. The next moment, they were a foot shorter with narrow shoulders and long, slender fingers. Their hooded cloak appeared to be made of darkness itself, like a rippling black hole that sucked in all the light around it. As they moved, the cloak changed the proportions of their body like a shifting shadow. Under their hood, their face was obscured by churning darkness that curled down their arms and around their gloves like wisps of smoke. A prominent silver ring – the chrysalis key – glinted on one of their fingers.

The Shadowsmith.

Bitsy's mind raced as she pulled her head back behind the ottoman, blood pounding in her ears. The Shadowsmith must have stolen Chancellor Hershel's key to open the chrysalis door. Her chest rose and fell as she took shallow breaths. They had to get out of there.

She nudged Kosh and signalled for the door. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead as he gave a shaky nod.

To check that the coast was clear, Bitsy peered around the corner of the ottoman. The Shadowsmith had walked past where they were hiding and paused in the centre of the room. Where their cloak had touched the floor, it had left a dark trail that appeared to be fading. Bitsy couldn't see the Shadowsmith's magicore, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

The Shadowsmith turned their head slowly, surveying the room's magi-woven artefacts and farthingstone treasures. Bitsy half expected them to pull out a shadowy swag bag and start filling it up, but instead, they wiggled their shifting fingers like they were playing air piano. Plumes of dense black shadow ballooned from the Shadowsmith's cloak and transformed into giant hands, which bulldozed around the chrysalis, tipping over cabinets, opening trunks and punching into metal strongboxes like they were made of paper.

"*BRIEFCASE…*" a deep voice hissed, making the hairs on the back of Bitsy's neck stand on end. The Shadowsmith must be speaking to their magicore, she realized. Kosh nudged Bitsy's leg and pointed to the Chancellor's briefcase, hidden behind the red leather trunk only a few metres away. He mimicked picking it up.

Bitsy nodded. If the Shadowsmith was looking for the briefcase, then Riddlejax wanted whatever was inside it

… and that could mean disaster for the conjuring world. They couldn't just leave it.

Casting around for an idea, Bitsy's gaze fell on the farthingstone compass she'd seen earlier. It was only a short reach away; perhaps she could use it to cause a distraction.

Taking a deep breath, she shuffled ever so slightly out from their hiding place and grabbed the compass. She lifted it above her shoulder, aimed at the opposite end of the chrysalis and threw.

The compass soared through the air and crashed into a heap of books by the stairs, which toppled over and thudded onto the floor.

The Shadowsmith immediately spun around, their cloak billowing like a storm cloud. Claws sprouted from the fingers of the shadow-hands as they streaked towards the fallen books.

"Now!" Bitsy yelled.

They leaped from behind the ottoman and dashed across the chrysalis floor towards the red leather trunk. First to reach it, Kosh snatched the Chancellor's briefcase and turned for the door. "RUN!"

6

Adrenaline surged through Bitsy's veins as she burst through the doorway ahead of Kosh. Outside the chrysalis, the platform was eerily deserted. The cavern walls flashed like strobe lights, and frantic shouting echoed. A piercing shriek sounded above, and Bitsy ducked as a magicore resembling a flying carpet swooped overhead, chased by giant shadow-jaws. The jaws snapped ferociously at the magicore, nearly biting off its tail, but the magicore swerved at the last moment, causing the dark fangs to take a great chomp out of the cavern ceiling instead.

"Get to the stairs!" Kosh yelled, charging through the chrysalis doorway with the Chancellor's briefcase swinging in one hand. As he passed the threshold, a

clump of fluffy white hair materialized around his chin and throat, glistening like candyfloss.

Bitsy almost tripped over. "Why do you have a beard?"

Frowning, Kosh patted his face with his free hand. He tried ripping the beard away, but it looked glued to his skin. He opened his mouth and quickly shut it again, his eyes bulging in terror.

"What is it?" Bitsy asked breathlessly. "What's wrong?"

Kosh clamped his mouth shut like he was trying not to vomit. His jaw shuddered, and then…

"I'M A THIEF!" he exclaimed as he ran. "I'M A THIEF!"

Bitsy shook her head. "What are you doing?"

"I'M A THIEF!" Kosh cried helplessly.

Unbubbalievable appeared, clinging to Kosh's chest like a furry vest. She picked at Kosh's candyfloss beard with her fingers, looking intrigued. Kosh clamped his lips shut to stop from shouting. Bitsy could tell by the panic in his eyes that he had lost control of his voice. What was happening? Then, with a flash, she remembered Chancellor Hershel saying that if anyone tried to steal anything from the chrysalides, they would be marked by a proxipatch, a magi-woven device crafted by proxiwigs.

"I think your beard's a proxipatch!" she yelled as they bolted up and over a terrace. "It must be manipulating