

Running at her usual pace, which was always entirely too fast, Sydney's bare feet slid sideways in the mud sending the little girl crashing head-first through the tall ferns.

"Not again," Austin groaned. "Sydney, get out of there." Remembering to be polite, he smiled at Sydney's little friend. He knew that her name was Alyssa because lately, Sydney had been spending her afternoons playing with her here in the forest and then chattering about their silly adventures.

Alyssa was frowning, which caused her bright blue eyes to darken to the color of a stormy ocean.

Wondering about that little frown, Austin squinted, trying to find his sister in the dense ferns. "Sydney?"

All was quiet.

Quiet and Sydney were two words that didn't go together, except when his Mom was yelling, "Sydney, be quiet!" His smile faded and he cautiously moved to the edge of the forest where his little sister had disappeared.

Alyssa's small hand reached up just in front of Austin's face, signaling for him to stop. Clutching his shirt sleeve, she said in a tiny voice, "A slide-trap. I will try to retrieve her."

Looking down, he noticed her small fingers gripping his sleeve. Pale. Not just pale, but almost glowing in the diffuse afternoon light under a high canopy of trees. Confused, Austin watched the little girl glide past him into the forest. He followed her, "She's just hiding..." Suddenly the ground gave way beneath him and he began to slide into the ferns in the same manner that Sydney had. Scrambling for a foothold, he grabbed at the ferns which came loose and slipped behind him into the rapidly growing chasm in the ground. He tumbled through a long slide made of soft soil that ran deep into the earth until at last, he stopped with a jolt. When the

dirt quit moving around him, he was sitting in moist soil unable to see anything at all. He groped around until his muddy fingers tangled into something hard and twisted. Tree roots. He wondered if he had fallen into a bear's cave. "Alyssa," he called softly.

"*Alyssa.*" The name echoed back to him.

He rubbed the mud from his hands onto his new jeans, brushed dirt from his face, and counted to five, hoping that his eyes would adjust to the darkness. "Sydney?"

"*Sydney... Sydney...*" Two echoes. How strange.

"Where are you?" He waited for the echo. There was none.

Clutching the tree roots for support, he stood. *Bump!* His head hit a rock ceiling. "Ouch."

The sound echoed, "*Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.*" His echo changed each time he heard it, as though someone with a squeaky little voice was mocking him. "*Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.*"

"That's not funny!" Austin's voice vibrated through the dark space, overpowering all other sound.

Then it was quiet.

He counted to five again. "Alyssa, Sydney!" Again no echo, in fact, it was so quiet that the sound of his breathing seemed very loud. He held his breath, listening.

"Help me," a small voice called. The voice was high-pitched like Sydney's, but it was not her.

He drew a deep breath and ducked his head, inching toward the sound of that small voice with his hands out in front of him to avoid bumping into things hidden in the darkness. All at once, he heard scampering sounds like a rat stampede bustling through the cave. He felt a flurry of activity; brushing his fingertips, pattering over his feet, and bumping his ankles. Something

wrenched his shirt sleeve, pulling fiercely. Reaching out, he found a small arm and clasped his fingers around a little wrist. "Alyssa."

Losing her grip on his sleeve, she was being pulled away from him. He held on, playing tug-of-war with the things he could not see deep in the earth. "Don't let them take me," Alyssa pleaded.

Austin was surprised when he tugged and found his strength more than adequate to retrieve Alyssa from whatever was pulling her away. His courage soared and he reached around the strange little girl to finish freeing her from the...whatevers. He grasped one little whatever, then another; her would-be captors were about half her size, so he began to push them away. The first squealed like a baby pig when he gave it a firm shove, the next squealed in the same manner. He continued pushing them away until multiple squeals filled the tunnel and then gradually faded into the distance.

Alyssa held his arm with both hands, "I have never met anyone so strong," her melodic voice filled the dark space.

That was the last thing Austin expected to hear. He was tough for such a little kid, but he was the smallest boy in sixth grade. No matter how tough he was, the big boys would always be stronger. But not today; today he was big and strong enough to assist Alyssa and get his sister out of this hole, or cave, or whatever. Today he was. Not. Afraid. Of. The. Dark. He sighed, blinking in the complete blackness. "Where's Sydney?"

"The Xyloc have taken her." Alyssa answered, holding his arm as though she never intended to let go.

"Is that what those little things are called?"

"No, those are Leals. Xyloc are huge, like you."

“Like me?” No one had ever called him huge. “Why would Xyloc take my sister?”

“Because of her eyes. Sturdy brown-eyed fairies have such strong magic.”

“That’s silly. Fairies? She’s not a fairy.”

“Let us hope then, that they do not discover her secret.”

“What secret?”

“Dark-eyed Sprites are rare indeed. She is quite large for a Sprite. Will the Sprite Queen barter for her?”

“What Sprite Queen? I don’t know what she has been telling you, but she’s not a Sprite.”

“Not a Sprite? What then?”

“Nothing.”

“Everyone is something,” Alyssa said softly.

“She’s a girl; an irritating, little, human girl.”

“Oh.” Alyssa released his arm and was silent for several long moments. “I was told that humans are giant, cruel, and smell bad. They eat their young and destroy the forest.”

“No way. We might be rough on the forest, but eat our young? That’s ridiculous.”

“Perhaps. You do not seem cruel.” Alyssa sniffed the air, “Have you ever eaten anyone?”

“Gross, no way. Have you?”

“Of course not. Everyone knows that fairies eat tender roots, mushrooms, and honeysuckle.”

Austin sniffed thoughtfully, “You smell like honeysuckle. Then, you’re a fairy?”

“Of course, I’m too big to possibly be a Sprite.” Alyssa made some fluttering sounds, “What kind of magic does Sydney have?”

“She doesn’t have any magic.”

“You are mistaken; everyone has some manner of magic. I heard her make sounds like thunder.”

“We had ice cream last night. She’s lactose intolerant.”

“You do not understand. She wrapped twine around her ears and a thunderous heartbeat filled the forest until she ordered it to stop.”

Austin was silent for a moment, “You mean her IPOD?” He paused and continued thoughtfully, “Yeah, I guess we do have magic.”

“You are a magical warrior.” Her words were a statement and he heard the awe in her voice. “What magic do you possess?”

“Well,” he thought a moment, “humans call it ‘technology’.”

“Is your magic powerful?”

“Yeah, I guess it is if you do it right.” He would have enjoyed allowing the little fairy to continue flattering him, but he was beginning to wonder how huge the Xyloc really were. “Let’s go get my sister.”

“The Xyloc will not give her back.”

“Why would they want to keep her?”

“They are lazy creatures; they want her to dig their tunnels.”

“You’re kidding, right? They think they’re going to make Sydney work? She won’t even clean her room.”

“She does not work? Of course, her magic must also be very powerful.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Then she will use her magic to free herself.” Alyssa’s voice was strong with confidence.

“Maybe. Maybe we should get her, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case she’s too scared to use her magic. She’s only six.”

“Six? Six what?”

“Six years old.”

“Do you mean six summers?”

“Yes. Six summers.”

“Oh my, a youngling.” She paused thoughtfully, “She is quite clever for one so young. I have never encountered a babe of only six summers. Come, we must retrieve her immediately.”

Austin heard the light flutter of her footsteps retreating, “Wait, I can’t see.”

Her fluttering stopped, “You fought the Leals without seeing them?”

“Yeah, and I bumped my head,” Austin rubbed the sore place on his head. The fluttering sound resumed and he felt her fingers brush across his scalp.

“It is not a mortal wound,” she dismissed his injury. “Are you blind?”

“No.” Her question made Austin wonder, could fairies see in the dark? He decided that they probably could. “It’s too dark for me to see.”

“Then you need light?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Now I understand why humans fear the dark. But you were not afraid. You are a brave magical warrior.” Alyssa squealed softly and made more fluttering sounds. Faint distant squeals sounded in response. Alyssa answered with more flutters and squeals and then the far end of the cave began to softly glow. A fat little glowing worm crawled out of a crack in a nearby stone. More appeared, followed by a flock of advancing lightning bugs, their combined

presence lighting up the cave. The bugs swarmed until Austin could see the entire cave. Alyssa looked different. She had... “Wings?”

She blushed and answered, “They only just unfurled.”

“Wow, they sparkle in buglight. Awesome!”

Pleased by the compliment, Alyssa fluttered around the cave on her newly unfurled wings. “The bugs have agreed to light our way to the Xyloc. In return, I told them that you would remove the boulder that the Xyloc rolled onto the firefly den.”

Austin had never moved a boulder, neither had he ever fought Leals, nor rescued anyone, but this was not an ordinary day. “I’ll try.”

“That will be sufficient.” Her voice was packed with confidence.

Alyssa fluttered behind Austin as he followed the glowing swarm into a low tunnel. They avoided touching the sides of the tunnel and Austin had to duck his head to avoid injuring the little bugs that lined the ceiling. He expected an epic journey with mythical monsters, danger at every turn, and maybe a beautiful princess somewhere in the mix. Instead, he stepped out of the passageway into a tall chamber filled with moist soil, large roots coiled into peculiar shapes, giant mushrooms, four strange little men with pointed ears, and Sydney.

“It took you long enough,” Sydney glared up at her big brother with both hands on her hips, “Come on; I told them you would dig a tunnel.”

“Are you kidding? Your magic doesn’t work on me. We’re going home as soon as I move a rock.” Austin took Sydney’s arm.

She tugged away, “I don’t wanna go.”

“Fine. Stay. Dig tunnels all by yourself; I’ve got a boulder to move.”

Sydney's brown eyes reflected the glow of bugs and fairy wings, "Alyssa, you really are a fairy. I knew it!"

Alyssa smiled, "Yes. I hope we can still play together in the forest, but you must go now. This is no place for a mortal child."

The four Xyloc looked at Sydney as though she had two heads and began to back away from her, "Mortal," one hissed. "Throw it in the pit," another growled.

Frightened by the sudden change of attitude in her companions, Sydney moved under the protective arm of her big brother and whispered, "Okay, I'll help you move the rock. I want to go home."

The Xyloc repeated, "Throw it in the pit." A dozen more of the stout little pointy-eared men swarmed into the chamber chanting, "*Throw it in the pit. Throw it in the pit.*"

Austin shifted to stand protectively in front of his sister and the little fairy. Alyssa fluttered her wings, lifted above him, and hovered over the strange little men. She fearlessly announced: "You shall all perish at the hands of this magical warrior." She landed on a giant mushroom and sat, looking on expectantly, "Please get on with it; I am eager to bring news of your demise to the good creatures of Nether-Earth."

Austin decided that maybe he should have clarified that magical warrior thing. Better yet, maybe the weird little men would believe it.

The Xyloc mumbled secretively, debating the fate of the mortal girl among themselves.

Austin whispered to his sister, "Turn on your IPOD. Keep the speaker where they won't see it and turn it up all the way."

Sydney smiled and manipulated the IPOD in her pocket. A loud base beat filled the chamber, causing loose soil to fall from the high ceiling. With the exception of an earthquake or

nearby thunder, the Xyloc had never heard such a frightening sound. They huddled together, covering their big pointed ears with their thick fingers.

Austin moved toward the huddled mass of creatures, each step in synchrony with the familiar rock beat. His careful movements made him appear to be controlling the musical beat. He froze during a pause in the music, waiting. A sudden hush fell and held, one beat, two, three, four, the little men waited fearfully for Austin to produce his magic. On cue, the hard-rock beat resumed and the Xyloc sucked in a collective gasp. Austin grinned, lifting his arms and shouting so loud that he feared the cavern would collapse.

The Xyloc fled in terror, clearing the cavern long before the echoes of Austin's voice did.

Austin turned and winked at his sister, "Come on, let's go move that boulder."

"I want to go home," Sydney argued.

"We will go home soon, but we have to move the boulder or the fireflies will not be able to go home." Austin took his sister's hand and pulled her along behind Alyssa and the swarm of glowing bugs.

Sydney still wanted to go home. She stomped along behind her brother, pouting.

When they reached the firefly den, Austin confidently placed both hands on one side of the large rock and pushed. It didn't move. He pushed again. Nothing.

"I can't move it," Austin said, still pushing with both hands.

"I can't move it," a small voice on the other side of the stone squealed.

"Fine. Let's go home." Sydney said.

"...go home," the little voice squealed, followed by a series of high-pitched screeches.

"That is a Leal. It must be trapped in the firefly den." Alyssa explained.

"Why is it screeching?" Sydney asked.

“Because Leals screech.”

“But why?”

“It is frightened. You said, ‘Let’s go home’. Do you intend to leave it trapped behind the boulder?”

“Oh, no.” As Sydney listened to the terrified sounds the Leal made, she felt sorry that she had not been more helpful. Sydney approached the stone and began to pull at it from the top.

“Don’t worry Leal, we’ll get you out.”

The screeching stopped.

Alyssa fluttered to the top of the stone and pulled.

With the combined strength of a fairy, a little girl, and a brave magical warrior, the stone moved slightly, then it moved a little more, and then rolled away from the firefly den.

Just inside the den, a pale thin creature stared at Sydney with large solid black eyes. It stood about two feet tall, was dressed in cobwebs, or maybe spider webs, and appeared to be very fragile. “We’ll get you out,” the small creature mimicked Sydney’s last words.

“Aw, it’s so cute!” Sydney exclaimed.

“...so cute,” the Leal mocked in a small squeaky voice.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Sydney asked Alyssa.

“...boy or a girl?” the Leal looked at Alyssa the same way Sydney was.

“Leals are just Leals,” Alyssa answered.

“...just Leals,” the creature repeated and then with a sudden burst of speed, the Leal ran past them to the dark tunnel.

“It didn’t even say thank you.” Sydney complained.

“...thank you...” The Leal’s squeaky voice echoed in the tunnel.

“You’re welcome,” Austin responded as though the Leal was not just mimicking them.

“Let’s go home; it’s supper time.”

Sydney looked up at her big brave brother and decided that he really might be a magical and clever warrior, but she would never tell him that.