A Fantastic Journey of Discovery for All Ages

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A NOVEL

of Valley

1

Theft

Bealomondore stood in the door of the darkened hall. Shadows hid the statue he'd been ordered to steal.

His heart told him to retreat. His feet wouldn't move. But the kimen, whose wildest flying lock of hair only reached to the tumanhofer's knee, insisted that the statue be stolen.

The artist cast the kimen a menacing look. The rude little man had startled him out of a sound sleep and proposed this ridiculous escapade. Bealomondore only wanted to go back to his chamber. In the middle of the night The proper place for an aristocratic tumanhofer was his bed.

He had not had time to dress properly. He looked disheveled. He straightened his tie, but he couldn't do anything about his wrinkled shirt. He closed his fine dinner coat and fastened two ornate buttons.

Bealomondore resented the fact that the small creature had managed to get him out of his bed, dressed, and actually contemplating the theft. An apprentice stealing the work of his esteemed master? Ludicrous!

"Come on," said Maxon. His tiny hand pushed at the back of Bealomondore's leg. "We haven't got all night."

"This is ill-advised," said Bealomondore. "Those statues have just been reunited. Why would your Wulder want one stolen?"

"Not stolen." The kimen's disgusted look further aggravated Bealomondore. He winced at the high-pitched protest flung at him. "I told you, 'Removed from harm's way.""

The tumanhofer surveyed his serene surroundings. Cool blue moonlight lay in lopsided rectangles on the floor before the ornate windows. Portraits hung mutely on the walls. An elaborate rug silenced footsteps on the marble floor. Not even a flatrat would raise a skittering noise.

His gaze returned to his companion. "We're in a guarded castle in a well-policed city with military posts all around. What harm could come to the statues here?"

Maxon crossed his thin arms over his wee chest. "I have my orders."

"I don't see why your orders are mine as well."

"You're needed." He backed up a step, placed his fists on his hips, and glared at the taller tumanhofer. "Are you going to turn your back on a call to service?"

Bealomondore nodded. "I think that's a reasonable choice."

The kimen sighed. "I was told this would be a difficult assignment."

They stood in silence. Bealomondore considered returning to his spacious chambers, warm bed, and pleasant dreams.

Maxon snapped his fingers. "Compromise!"

Bealomondore lifted one eyebrow. "We look out the windows, see if danger lurks, then forget this whole, outlandish idea. That's the only compromise I'm interested in."

The kimen ignored his ill humor and tugged on his pants once more. "Right! Let's go look at the statues. I want to see them up close."

"Looking is all right." Bealomondore smoothed the material of his sleeves and stepped into the hushed hall. "Taking is not."

His footsteps tapped on the marble floor as they approached the carpet centered in the hall.

"Shh!" said Maxon, who didn't make a sound as he glided toward the display of the revered sculptor Verrin Schope's famous *Trio of Elements*.

The three statues had been carved out of one stone, the brilliance of the artist depicted in the layered symbolism. The most obvious interpretation would be of morning, day, and night. But the trio also represented air, earth, and water. Kimen, emerlindian, and marione figures depicted three of the seven races that populated the world.

Recently brought to the attention of the royal court, the statues had not yet been expounded upon by critics. Bealomondore felt more symbolism would be exposed with time. Master Sculptor Verrin Schope layered his work with meaning. He could almost coax life into the cold stone.

The craftsmanship alone made the art valuable. The depth of the imagery would place the art among the most famous classics. Bealomondore's pride in being under Verrin Schope's tutelage puffed out his chest. And he, a humble but aspiring artist, was privy to the backstory of these magnificent pieces. The history and intrigue surrounding the importance of the original stone . . . that would become the material of legends.

And perhaps humble Graddapotmorphit Bealomondore of Greeston in Dornum would be mentioned for his part in the fantastic quest. He patted his chest, a smile tugging at his lips.

As he and Maxon passed a pillar, the entire display came into sight. Bealomondore stopped and gasped at the vacant spot in the circle of three statues.

"One's already gone," whispered Maxon. "See? I told you we had to act quickly."

Bealomondore whipped his head around, searching the shadows, hoping to spy some thief tiptoeing out of the hall.

Nothing stirred.

"Take it," urged Maxon. "Take Day's Deed before the thief comes back for it."

"I don't understand your reasoning. I don't understand why I'm supposed to believe your Wulder would urge me to steal."

The kimen vibrated. His already shrill voice screeched up a notch. "Not stealing! Protecting! We can't let a wicked force get hold of all three statues. You don't want to be responsible for the evil consequences, do you?"

That caught his attention. The *Trio of Elements* had been rescued from the hands of a nefarious wizard. If someone plotted to steal all three, then having one in Bealomondore's possession would thwart the evildoer's plans.

"Why do we have to leave the city?"

"Because," answered Maxon, prodding Bealomondore closer to the two figures in stone. "We don't know who the perpetrator is and getting as far away as possible is critical." Maxon turned away from Bealomondore, braced his back against the tumanhofer's leg, and pushed. "And if the thief is here in the palace, we won't be able to keep him from stealing another piece of the *Trio*."

"Fine!" Bealomondore picked up the statue of a marione farmer. "Where's that sack you brought along?"

Maxon jumped away and did a little skip. "Hollow. It's a hollow bag, given to me by your honored wizard friend, Fenworth."

"Friend? More like acquaintance. He's an odd man, and even after questing with him, I don't claim to know him well enough to say friend."

Maxon put his hand through the material of his tunic and pulled out a limp, cloth bag. He held it open as Bealomondore lowered the statue. The neck of the hollow bulged, but as the stone figure disappeared, the material returned to a flaccid state.

The kimen thrust the bag toward the tumanhofer. "You take it."

Bealomondore clenched his fists. "Why? It certainly is not too heavy for you to tote."

"My orders say for you to take it. Not me."

Bealomondore hesitated while Maxon thrust the empty-looking sack at him. The image of a mercenary army marching through a gateway created by villains using the three stones made his stomach tighten. He had no desire to repeat that event in the near future.

He sighed and took the bag, rolling it into a tight cylinder, then stuffed it in his stylish shoulder satchel. "At least, in this form, the bulky statue won't ruin the lines of my attire." He looked down at his mismatched jacket, trousers, vest, and crumpled cravat.

The kimen's light laughter echoed in the hall. Maxon clamped his hand over his own mouth.

Bealomondore studied the little man's face. Bright cheerful eyes twinkled at him. With wispy hair and no eyebrows, kimens always looked surprised. Their clothing was an odd substance, both beautiful and as disorderly as their topknot. In Chiril, the little people did not mix with the other six high races, and this added to their mystique. The artist in Bealomondore wanted to capture Maxon's expression of delight.

Maxon lowered his hand. "You wear very nice clothes. But we don't have time to pack a bag."

That statement jerked the tumanhofer out of any appreciation for the comeliness of his companion.

He growled his disapproval. "You expect me to travel to who-knows-where with only the clothes on my back?"

Maxon nodded vigorously. "Indeed, I do. But it isn't as bad as you might think. If I'm right, we'll be directed to a kimen village in the Starling Forest. They'll have adequate accommodations and clothing you'll admire."

"And if you're wrong?"

He shook his head, wild hair lashing the air. "You like to worry." He turned and headed for the far end of the great hall. "Come on. Let's sneak out and find our contact."

Bealomondore stepped softly behind the kimen, who moved with such grace, he appeared to be floating. No one challenged them as they skulked by the guard stations. The tumanhofer glowered at their lack of alertness. He wouldn't be stealing this statue if they were more conscientious in their duties.

He and the kimen reached the courtyard lit with torches and walked boldly to the massive gate.

Two soldiers stood sentinel. They saluted as the king's guests left the castle grounds at three o'clock in the morning.

After they entered the deserted street, Bealomondore whispered to his short companion. "Someone should do something about the lax security of the castle."

"Why?" Maxon turned quickly, with a puzzled air. "No one has challenged the king of Chiril for centuries."

"I seem to remember a wicked wizard and a delusional gentleman farmer attempting to take over the kingdom less than a week ago."

"Yes, that unfortunate circumstance disturbed our calm a bit. But you must agree that rebellion is a very rare occurrence, and once it has happened, is not likely to be repeated any time soon."

"The law of probability?"

Maxon nodded. "Exactly."

"I'm not sure that applies to nefarious deeds. It seems to me that once evil permeates the air, more evil mushrooms out of the dark recesses of society."

"But that proves my point. We aren't likely to have another paid army run by Chirilian madmen running amuck in our land. Odds are that this is an entirely different foe we must look out for."

"I'd rather be on the look out for spring showers, buds swelling to full blossoms, birds serenading the earth's renewel, and breezes ushering the fragrance of rich loam from the newly plowed fields."

The kimen stopped, again planted his fists on his hips, and tilted his head to look up at Bealomondore. "I thought you were an artist. You sound like a poet."

"I am, indeed, an artist. But the sensitive soul requires a more sophisticated language to express profound observations."

The kimen giggled and resumed his march to whatever destination he'd chosen. Bealomondore followed, fuming over lackadaisical guards, impertinent kimens, and the dubious honor of protecting a magnificent piece of art.

Just before dawn they reached a small cookery at the outskirts of the city. Wonderful aromas filled the air. Bealomondore's stomach rumbled. Red letters proclaimed *Good Food-Cheap Cheep*.

Maxon waved toward a big building down the lane. "This place opens the day by serving breakfast to workers in a nearby weaving facility."

The small print under the name of the establishment said, "Eggs and such for breakfast. All things poultry for noonmeal. No dinner served."

Maxon ducked down an alley and headed to the back of the bustling business. He spoke over his shoulder. "You'd like the work done at the mill, real art in cloth. Meals here at Cheap Cheep are included as part of the artisans' wages.

"I'm familiar with the quality of Ragar Textile." Bealomondore followed Maxon through the back door.

A marione wearing an apron over his plain clothes waved a ladle at them in greeting. "Maxon, you have kimens waiting for you," he said. "They're in the backroom."

"Wait here," the kimen ordered Bealomondore and disappeared through a rough-hewn door.

The tumanhofer twisted his lower lip in displeasure.

"Hungry?" asked the cook.

"Starving."

The marione gestured toward a table. "Have a seat, and I'll bring you today's special."

In only a moment, he placed a steaming plate of krupant and thick slices of bread in front of Bealomondore.

"Bring it in here," Maxon called from the doorway. "My friends want to meet you."

Bealomondore picked up the plate and spoon and ducked through the wooden door. He saw no lighting in the room other than the shine of the kimens' apparel. He counted five besides Maxon and nodded as he was introduced. They sat with empty plates before them, obviously having already enjoyed a hearty meal.

Maxon pointed to a chair made for a larger person, and Bealomondore joined them. He placed his food before him and considered taking his satchel holding the hollow bag off his shoulder. Between his feet below the table might be safe, but he decided to keep it on his person. The Verrin Schope statue would receive his wholehearted protection.

"I'm Winkel. We'll be taking you to our village," said the kimen sitting at the head of the table. She poured a liquid from a large pitcher into a tankard and pushed it across the table.

"Thank you." Bealomondore took a swig and found the substance unfamiliar to him, but very soothing to his dry throat. He dug into his meal with gusto as the little people talked among themselves.

The more he ate, the more content he felt. Winkel refilled his drink as soon as Bealomondore drained it.

Kimens were known to be courteous, friendly people, but it niggled at his brain that the depth of his comfort among them seemed unnatural. He was ordinarily cautious and observant, necessary skills in navigating the waters of high society where friend could become foe with the turn of a phrase. In unfamiliar circumstances, he paid attention to detail and unobtrusively gathered information about strangers. But as the tension eased out of his shoulders, he let go of all worries, and the high voices around him became a tune of good cheer.

He ate and drank and mellowed to the point of drowsiness. When he found he had to work to keep his eyes open, he caught Maxon watching him with an expectant expression.

An alarming thought rose to the top of his muddled mind as he sagged toward the empty plate before him. The kind kimens had drugged him.

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Two Taken

Tipper Schope tiptoed through the wet, nasty tunnel. She stepped in a cold puddle and gasped. For a moment her eyes flashed from the little light dancing ahead of her to the uneven floor. She clutched to her chest a sack that looked empty but held one of her father's most interesting statues.

She hugged the limp cloth tighter, wishing she had a shawl or coat to wrap around her shoulders. She wiggled her toes. Her face scrunched in reaction to the repulsive squishy feeling of wet stockings in the heavy boots. Closing her eyes, she sighed and summoned courage. Her father had said to trust him, to follow his instructions precisely, and all would be well.

He'd told her to wear britches, boots, and a warm shirt and tunic. Perhaps she wasn't so much chilled as terrified.

The air stirred. She heard, rather than saw, the kimen approach. The small creature moved quickly, and the fluttering of her clothes sounded like bird wings beating the spring air. But this was no sunny day in a glade. Tipper shivered and opened her eyes.

The kimen cocked her head, a mixture of concern and impatience on her face. "Are you all right?"

Tipper's teeth chattered. "I'm cold, but otherwise fine. Please don't go so far ahead of me, Taeda Bel."

The kimen's sudden, bright smile dazzled Tipper. "I understand. I forget you don't carry your own light."

The tiny being bent at the waist in a bow that would have done a footman in Tipper's grandfather's castle proud.

Tipper giggled. Partly from nerves, but also because the very feminine kimen looked way too girlish for the formal masculine gesture. Her gleaming, though ragged, gown of delicate pink shimmered as the miniature guide moved.

Taeda Bel straightened with grace. The arm that had been swept before her bow extended high over her head in an elegant pose. She twirled and took off down the dank tunnel as if she danced across a ballet stage.

Taeda Bel flitted forward and then returned closer to Tipper. Tipper smiled at the kimen's consideration. Their passage through the underground corridor made Tipper's skin crawl. By her estimation, their mission was unnecessary. But she had promised to take the statue out of the castle.

What had her father meant about invasion? Of course, they'd been invaded, but Paladin and Wizard Fenworth took care of that. The villains had been vanquished. Paladin disbanded the conscripted army. Under his watchful eye, the young men were sent back to their own lands.

"Paladin," she muttered under her breath. "What is he? Oh, right! He's tall and charming. His smile makes my knees wobbly. His voice plucks my heart like a lute. He sets me to singing, inside and out. What an embarrassment."

She stomped in the next few puddles. "It's probably best I'm off on this errand for Papa. Even Mother noticed I couldn't look straight into those blue eyes. Nobody should have eyes the color of cobalt skies."

She hummed a few lines of a song she'd made up about one man's eyes twinkling and a girl bubbling with joy. She caught herself and slammed her foot down in a puddle. The water drenched her leg, and she stumbled.

Taeda Bel appeared by her side. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She shook her foot. "It was deeper than I thought."

"Be careful." Taeda Bel hopped in the air and floated down. "If you got hurt, it would be more than an inconvenience."

"Right. I'll remember."

The kimen took up her lead position, and Tipper dutifully followed.

Her mind still chewed on the enigma of the mysterious young man who had assumed a status of leader. Prince Jayrus, he had called himself, though he claimed no real kingdom. Her father and his friends called him Paladin, the leader of some foreign religion. Perhaps it would be good to be away from everyone so she could order things in her mind. Everyone respected Paladin, and she did too.

"More reason for me to be out of his way. If he is who he says he is, he doesn't need me around."

"What was that?" asked Taeda Bel without slowing her pace.

"Never mind."

Tipper clamped her mouth shut. This Prince Jayrus—Paladin person could befuddle her grandfather's court. She was free and clear. She didn't have to puzzle out the mystery he presented.

He was a mixture of wisdom and social ineptitude. But she didn't have to think about it.

He knew which fork to pick up at a fancy dinner, but his conversation revealed he'd spent more time with books than with people. Who used 'verisimilitude' in everyday speech? Who compared a sunset to a resplendent pennon? Who knew what a pennon was?

Paladin was back at her grandparents' castle, the Amber Palace. A good place for him to be, because she wasn't.

Tipper's untimely departure separated her from the company of Paladin. Maybe she did want to know Paladin better, but that meant she'd have to listen to him explain the contents of Wulder's Tomes. That's what it would take to keep his interest.

Ha! He was way too busy to be interested in her. And she, of course, was going to be way too busy protecting the statue to even think about him.

Her father had not told her how long she and the statue would be banished from Amber Palace and the city. He simply said to follow the kimen.

Tipper splashed through another puddle, resisted the urge to groan, and kept an eye on the light in the distance. Taeda Bel had forgotten her promise to stay close.

Tipper picked up her pace and gained on the little kimen. Her friendly guide must have stopped to wait for her. When she reached Taeda Bel's side, a breath of warm, dry air greeted her.

The kimen's shine decreased. "We're leaving the caverns now." She stood inside the lip of the opening, with her back pressed against the rock wall. "I won't use my light as we slip through the woods. There's almost too much moonlight for proper darkness to keep us hidden." Her voice

trailed off as if she were talking more to herself than to Tipper. Taeda Bel looked sharply at her charge. "Can you keep up with me?"

"Yes."

Taeda Bel's dim glow extinguished.

The sudden darkness radiated with soft sounds. Tipper held her breath. She heard tree frogs, night birds, and the breeze rattling leaves in trees and bushes. Slowly she released the air in her lungs and took a step out of the cave.

She leaned to whisper in the kimen's ear. "There's something in the forest besides creatures of the night."

"I know."

"Do you know what or who?"

By the light of the moon, Tipper saw the kimen nod. "Who and what."

Tipper bit back a sarcastic reply. "Then tell me."

"A band of mariones and bisonbecks."

"Bisonbecks? The mountain tribe of renegades from the land of Mordack? They've never come to Chiril."

"And they wouldn't now except they come at the orders of King Odidoddex."

Tipper did a quick survey of her knowledge of the neighboring countries. The mountains of Mordack contained wild creatures, namely, three of the seven low races—ropma, grawligs, and bisonbecks. The region stood as a territory of unrest with no government and no order. None of the bordering lands would claim it under their jurisdictions. Travelers skirted around the dangerous mountains. Only a few outlaws dared to hide with the crude rogues of the hinterland.

Tipper cocked her head. "Mariones from Mordack?"

"No, mariones under the rule of King Odidoddex."

Tipper scrunched her forehead, picturing the country tinged with brown and green on the map she'd seen as a child. "In Baardack?"

"No, in our backyard." Taeda Bel pushed through thick bushes, releasing the fragrance of sweet bumberlilies. "The Baardack army is still tramping through the mountains. They intend to capture Ragar and take over the throne on behalf of Odidoddex."

Tipper turned back to the dank cave. "My family!"

The kimen grabbed her fingertips. "Your family will be all right. Our task is to keep the villains from getting their hands on all three of your father's statues."

Taeda Bel stilled as if listening, then her image faded so that even with the moonlight, Tipper strained to see her outline. Had the kimen moved?

"Come," Taeda Bel commanded.

"There!" a harsh voice ripped the calm.

"Run!" Taeda Bel's light brightened just enough for Tipper to be able to follow.

Someone crashed through the underbrush behind them. Tipper abandoned any attempt to move quietly and ran. Soon she heard exclamations from different directions. It sounded as if they were surrounded. Voices growled commands she didn't understand but assumed meant they were bent on capturing her and Taeda Bel. In a breathless race to escape their pursuers, Tipper kept her eyes on the kimen and hoped the small creature knew where to go.

Taeda Bel's thin voice sounded in Tipper's mind. Hide!

Tipper fell to the ground and scrambled under the bushes. The sound of Taeda Bel's voice in her head had hardly faded before heavy boots clomped by. Tipper started to inch out of her cover as soon as the soldier had moved on, but again her small guide gave a mindspeak command.

Stay there!

Tipper pulled herself into a ball and tried to make no noise. Her breathing sounded loud enough to herald her presence, and she wondered if anyone else could hear her heart thumping.

Two more hulking soldiers pounded past her hiding place. Shouts filled the air. The men realized they'd lost her. She heard them beating the bushes. She pictured their heavy swords slicing through the branches.

In desperation, Tipper tried to project a call with her own mind. "Taeda Bel?"

Did it work? Was she heard? Her father, Wizard Fenworth, and Librettowit could mindspeak, but she could just barely understand the dragons when they spoke to her. Would the kimen hear her? "Taeda Bel?"

No response. Tipper heard the guards. They'd changed directions, coming back toward her hiding place.

This time she whispered the kimen's name through clenched teeth. "Taeda Bel?"

Again, no answer. Tipper winced as two men shouted. She crawled out from her refuge and crouched in the indistinct path. Her sense of direction deserted her, but she knew the correct way to go was away from the noise made by the soldiers. Keeping low, she darted from one clump of trees to the next.

The darkness spooked her as branches reached out like arms, and rustling leaves brought visions of soldiers waiting for her. But the commotion made by her pursuers grew distant. Perhaps she would escape after all.

A figure stepped out in front of her. She screeched and whirled to get away, but another bisonbeck soldier blocked her escape. He grabbed her by the arms and hoisted her over his shoulder.

She screamed and kicked.

"Wait," said a gruff voice. "Let's see what's in that thing she carries."

The man with a vise grip on her legs grunted. "Shouldn't we let First Speatus have the honors?"

A noise that blended a growl and a scornful laugh sent chills down Tipper's spine.

"Why should we give booty to him? If it's valuable, it's ours. No one need know." His voice came closer. "Dump her."

The huge man dropped her on the ground and put a boot on her stomach. Tipper gripped the hollow sack and struggled to breathe.

With one yank, the second soldier took possession of her father's statue still hidden inside the nondescript bag.

"There's nothing in it," said the bisonbeck with a heavy foot on her middle. "Empty."

"Sometimes things of great value are very small. A diamond, for instance." He shook the bag and frowned.

Tipper tried to speak, but no words came out.

The rougher soldier, the one who seemed in charge, looked into the cloth sack, then stuck his massive hand inside. He hollered and threw the bag down. It landed on Tipper's face, and she shook

her head to dislodge the obstruction to her view. She gasped when she saw smoke curling into the air over the singed hair on the soldier's hand and wrist.

He growled, glaring at the other bisonbeck to cut off his subordinate's ill-timed laugh.

"Pick her up. We'll take the bag to First."

Get ready to run. Taeda Bel's warning washed relief over Tipper's despair. Close your eyes.

Tipper did as she was told, losing sight of the ugly brute as he bent to grab her. A flash of light surprised her. She saw only red through her eyelids, but the men grunted and stumbled.

Now! Run!

Tipper snatched the sack by her head, scrambled to her feet, and took off. Taeda Bel's light flitted through the trees and Tipper followed. She heard her own panting. She felt her blood pumping within her ears. But she didn't hear anyone in pursuit. She slowed. The night noises of the forest had disappeared. She trudged toward the light. It grew dimmer.

"Taeda Bel, wait!"

Was that kimen deaf?

"Taeda Bel!" Would her hoarse whisper be heard? Could she safely call louder?

Something gripped her ankle. Had she stepped into a mess of vines? She needed light. She needed Taeda Bel. She stooped to untangle her foot, but as she leaned over, whatever held her captive jerked. She landed on her face and felt rope-like fingers knot around her other leg. She screamed, "Taeda Bel!"

"Shh!" came a voice close to her face.

Tipper peered into the dark but saw only intertwined vegetation.

"Gotcha," said another voice near her feet.

Whatever it was began to drag her.

"Taeda Bel!"

Someone pinched her shoulder. She saw only a mass of leaves and vines leaning over her, but this plant reached forward and pushed against her shoulders, aiding the efforts of whatever held her feet.

She took a deep breath to scream again, and a fistful of leaves pushed into her open mouth. Foul tasting. Choking. She bit down and heard only a wicked little giggle.

"Sh!"

"Gotcha."

They pushed and pulled her down an incline. She expected to come to a level place. No huge hills existed in any part of the woods scattered around the city.

Loose dirt replaced the air and forest undergrowth. Soil covered her legs and hips. The angle of the tilt steepened. Her back and shoulders sank into the ground. She was not going down a hill, but under the earth.

"Please." The mangled word sounded nothing like a plea for mercy.

They kept at it, laughing a little with suppressed pleasure.

"We got 'er," said the one pushing.

"Gotcha," came the muffled reply.

The dirt surrounded Tipper's neck and chin. She tried to pull in a deep breath before her head went under. She inhaled a leaf, choked, and only barely heard the next comment from her captors.

"Knew we could."

"Gotcha, gotcha."