

# Prologue

Gatekeepers; it is their duty to guard the portals between the worlds until time itself ends. There are many other worlds, each is like a splinter shaved from this reality, for this world is the most complete.

Without Gatekeepers, chaos would ensue as the portals between the worlds would become vast gateways for the worlds' armies to meet each other in a war of power that could destroy not only this world, but many others as well.

That is why, eons ago, the Gates family was charged with stewardship over the portals. The job is difficult, dangerous, and fun. The Gates must be very good diplomats, know where all the portals are – for they are all over the Gates' house – and be very patient with strange creatures in the living room and dragons burning the pizza.

Other than having a home that has portals to other worlds and working with hundreds of different races on a regular basis, gatekeepers are not that different from the rest of humanity. Over the years, though, they have developed a few small powers from their centuries of work, but they are subtle, small, and not very noticeable. No one in the family can fly, turn invisible, or anything like the superheroes in the comics that children read.

These records are currently kept by Polly Gates, who protects them. It is not a job to be taken lightly, for this record is a history for many peoples and many worlds.

# Chapter 1: The Move

The Gates woke up one morning to find that the house had moved. They had expected that it was up to something when they caught glimpses of legal papers that seemed to be shuffling around in the file cabinet, but it was still a bit of a shock to wake up and not know exactly where they were.

Ed, the oldest son, came running into the house before breakfast. “Mom, Dad, I think I have it!”

“Have what?” his mother asked as she scolded Sizzle for burning the muffins. Sizzle, the dragon who helps them cook, lives in the cave on the other side of the top oven. He’s very helpful and friendly, but he’s allergic to cheese.

Don’t cook cheese in the top oven, unless you like fire in the kitchen. If the Gates have to cook something with cheese, they do it in the bottom oven. Caramel, Sizzle’s girlfriend, lives in the bottom oven. She is allergic to oregano. So in their house, they cook pizza in the perfectly normal microwave.

“I have it,” Ed repeated. “I know where we are. I drove around for a while this morning until I found a few stores where I could get information. We’re in Pottsville. We’re out in the country, but we’re right beside Leesville. It’s a big city.”

Ed’s mother put down the pan she was holding, spilling some oil on the counter. “Why would the house move near Leesville?” she asked, frowning. “My sister, Sally, lives there,

and the house never moves us near family. It seems like a bad sign.” She gestured nervously as she spoke. “How in this world will I explain the house to her? She will expect to be welcome here any time. After all, she is my sister.” She began to scramble the eggs with greater vigor than was strictly necessary and with worry in her eyes.

Edward Aldis Ferdinand Gates the fourth, the father of the family, came down the stairs, tying his tie. “How can we be near Leesville? I was supposed to fly to New York today to meet with an elite jewelry store about supplying for them. I don’t have a ticket to fly out of Leesville.”

He put his briefcase on the kitchen desk. “I guess I’ll have to change my flight plans,” he noted, frustrated. He opened a desk drawer to get the phone book, and opened his briefcase for a pencil. He was surprised to see a ticket from Leesville to New York where his other ticket had been.

“I guess the magic gets everything right,” he noted as he looked over the ticket and sat down for breakfast.

Ed sat down beside him, and his mom rang the bell for everyone to come and eat.

As Sophie, the 13-year-old sister, came quietly down the stairs, Darnell ran from his room, slid halfway down the banister, and dropped to the floor, rolling to his feet. He grinned excitedly at the assembled adults. “The house upgraded!” he shouted with glee. “My room got bigger!” He winked and whispered conspiratorially, “Vicky’s mad because the portal to Fashion moved to Sophie’s side of the room. Sophie deserves it. She’s nicer.”

“Don’t slide down the banister!” his mother scolded. “And Vicky knows the portal is for both girls, so it doesn’t matter which side of the room it’s on.”

“It does to Vicky,” Darnell muttered under his breath.

“Are you fighting?” Zoe, an adorable little girl with blonde curls asked, entering the room. She sat at the table by her plate of eggs and asked for bacon, opening her large, blue eyes to their widest extent and smiling like an angel. Her mother got up and made it. Zoe then wanted chocolate milk and toast, which she got because everyone seemed to be wrapped around her cute little 8-year old finger.

Vicky came late, as usual. She had been busy fixing her hair and make-up. “It’s not fair!” she exclaimed. “We just moved a year ago. Normally we wait a few more years to move again. How do I explain this to my friends? I never mentioned moving to them before. I was supposed to have a really great date tonight.”

Darnell leaned over to Ed. “Brian was a jerk anyway,” he informed the older brother. “Only an idiot would date him.” He ducked to avoid Vicky’s napkin.

Grandpa Eddie and Grandma Polly often didn’t eat with the family, so no one was concerned when they didn’t show up.

Lack of concern is not an admirable quality in a gatekeeper. It was at breakfast the troubles began.

They were all happily eating the bacon that Zoe had requested when Grandpa Eddie ran inside through the talking doors.

“Slow down Oldie!” the rude door called. “’Twould be prudent to reduce thy pace Wise One,” the other called.

Eddie ignored them, turned on the TV, and started flipping wildly through the channels.

“What’s wrong?” Sue asked her father-in-law. When Eddie had that look in his eyes, it always meant something was wrong.

The old man continued his furious flicking for a moment before answering, “It seems there is an intruder in the Enchanted Forest. Somehow he must have slid past me during the move. The creatures in the forest fear they are in danger. There are many who hunt their magic.”

He watched the TV, which was set now to show what was going on in the Enchanted Forest. Unfortunately, the locations shown on the TV were limited, so he couldn’t find the intruder.

Ed came over to help. It probably should have been his father’s job, but his dad had a plane to catch. Edward Aldis Ferdinand Gates the Fourth was a busy man, so often it was Ed who had to take over issues in his father’s absence. Ed also knew that he would one day be head of the Gates clan, as his Grandfather was now. He was always eager for an opportunity to learn from his grandfather so he could be ready.

“Do you know who the intruder is?” he asked his grandfather, with more respect than any other child in his family showed.

“Not yet,” the old man responded. “I’m not even sure where the intruder is from.”

“I’ll go hunt him,” Ed volunteered, glad for a chance to do his duty. “Just let me get my sword and bow, and I’ll be ready.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Grandpa agreed. “I’ll go with you. We know there’s only one way out, so if we guard the Gate, we can catch him when he tries to leave.”

Ed nodded. “That’s true, but we may want to go hunt him. If he intends to harm one of the creatures, we don’t want to wait to catch him on the way out.”

Darnell stood and took a gallant pose. “And I will bravely watch you on TV!” he declared. His mom never let him do anything dangerous.

Vicky poured water on his head, and Sophie separated them before a fight could ensue.

Edward put down his briefcase. “Do I need to cancel my flight to stay and help?” he asked.

“No,” Grandpa Eddie assured him. “We can deal with this. Last time it was just a little girl who had wandered from Harmony and wanted to see a real unicorn. It’s probably not an emergency.”

“But we’d better treat it like one,” Ed added. “Just in case.”

Edward smiled gruffly at his son. “I’m going to go. I’m sure you can handle this.” He said his good-byes and left.

Ed ran upstairs to get his weapons. Then the doorbell rang.

Everyone paused and exchanged surprised glances. The Gates were used to many odd things, but visitors were less common than sharks in the bathtub, which happened at least

once a week. They never invited people over, and they couldn't believe anyone would even know they were there yet.

Sue opened the door to find her sister Sally standing on the doorstep with her four children. "I can't believe you didn't tell me you were moving into the area," Sally scolded.

Sue looked uneasy. "It was a last-minute decision. I thought we'd surprise you."

Sally laughed in a haughty sort of way that set everyone on edge. "I haven't known for long, but did you really think you could surprise me when my husband's firm handled the legal papers?"

"I guess not," Sue answered, years of practice allowing her to easily cover her own surprise.

Sally marched in the doorway with her children in a line behind her. 17-year-old Albert's lanky frame followed exactly behind his mother, though he rolled his eyes at her oblivious back. 15-year-old Miranda came behind him holding the 2-year-old Scotty, and Karina, 10, followed quietly behind. Darnell stifled a laugh. They looked like the soldiers he had seen on TV, all in line and looking serious.

Karina caught her cousin's eye and grinned behind her mother's back, sticking her tongue out and crossing her eyes.

Sally looked around wide-eyed. "You've unpacked already? Everything looks so lived in, and you just moved."

"Um..." Sue stuttered, "We've moved often, so we're good at unpacking." She shrugged almost nonchalantly. She almost felt relief when Ed came down the front staircase with his well-

oiled, four-foot broadsword. He held a short composite bow in his hand and a quiver of arrows on his back.

“What is all that for?” Sally gasped, well-bred shock evident in her voice.

Ed looked unfazed. “Just a hobby.” He hurried over to Grandpa and they headed out for the tree house.

Darnell leaned out the door after them. “Bring me back a souvenir!” he called, oblivious to his aunt's reproachful eyes.

Sue motioned her sister into the den. Several boxes had appeared in their absence. “This is a mess!” Sally admonished, “Can't you clean your house?”

Sue was more concerned about a movement from inside one of the boxes and Zoe's voice calling, “Let me out! It's dark in here!”

Sue helped her youngest child out of the box. “Darnell did it!” Zoe accused the moment she was free.

“Did not!” said felon rebutted from the safety of the stairs. “You tried to steal Vicky's make-up and fell in!”

“Your children are completely unruly,” Sally complained.

Zoe looked up at her aunt, her eyes widening to a sea of sky blue. “I'm not unruly, am I?” she sniffled.

It seemed to put even Aunt Sally off her guard. “Ah...no, I suppose it's just that brother of yours.”

Zoe flashed her an angelic smile and turned to chase Darnell up the stairs.



Sue felt rather awkward as she turned and explained the house rules to her sister's family. "Don't flush the upstairs toilet several times in a row. No opening the oven. If you run around the tree house, run clockwise. Don't watch TV. Don't open the blinds in the sunroom. Don't go into the basement. Avoid the back doors. And most importantly, don't do anything if one of the Gates tells you not to."

Sally raised an eyebrow. "My children always obey the rules, even if they seem odd," she said stiffly.

She then snapped and waved for the children to go play so she could speak with her sister.

Sue sighed and led her sister to the living room. It was a perky peach color that day. "Please, have a seat," she offered.

Vicky, Sophie, Albert, and Miranda went up to Vicky's room to play a board game. Zoe took Scotty into the sunroom and pulled out the toys.

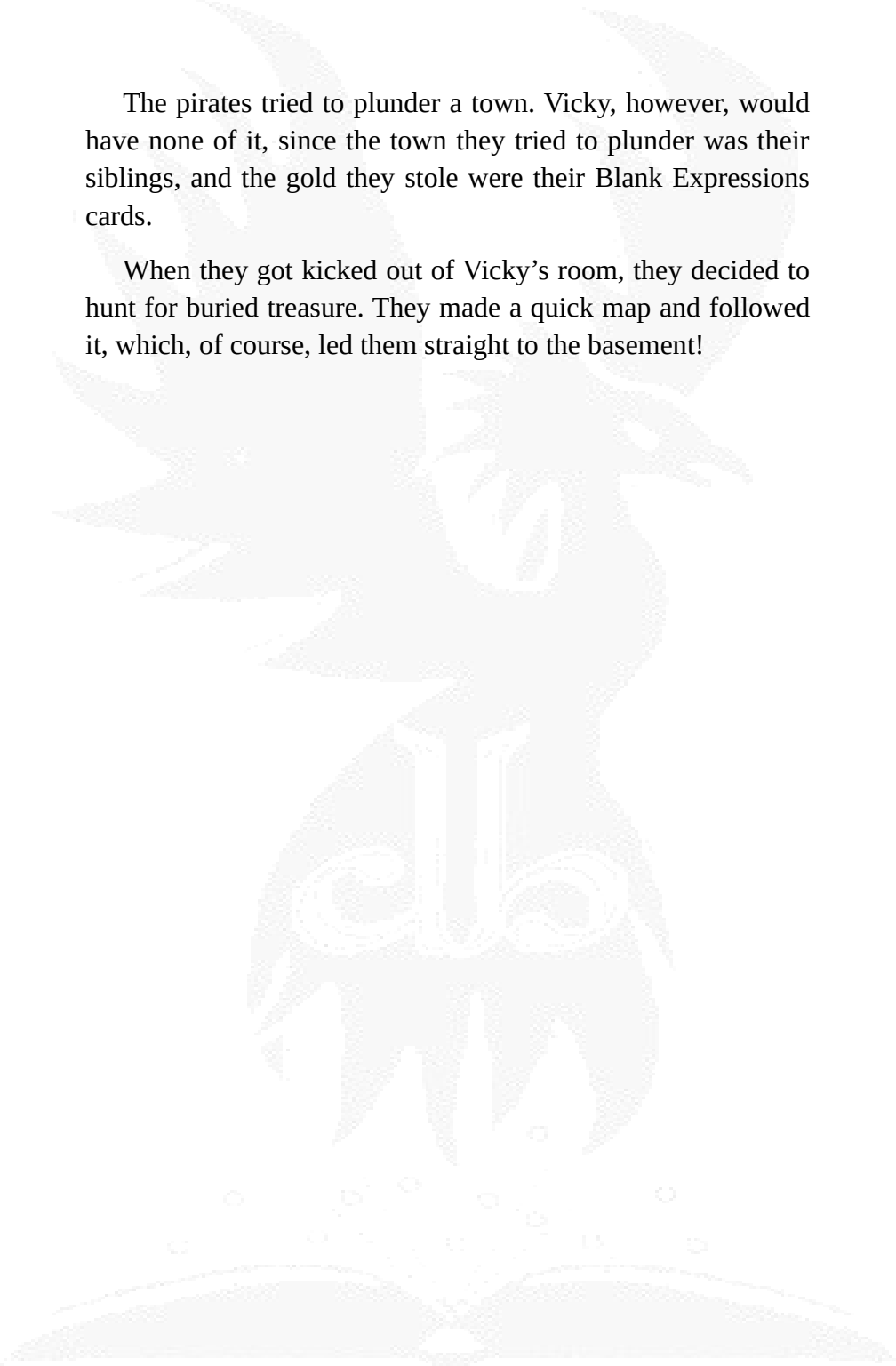
Darnell and Karina went to his room to play pirates. They had a wonderful time. Darnell was Captain Bloodbeard, the Terrible. Karina wanted to be captain too, but there could only be one captain on a ship.

Darnell's and Ed's beds became rival pirate ships and each tried to sink the other by throwing Nerf balls around the room. They jumped back and forth across the beds trying to capture each other.

Then Captain Cannon Karina became Bloodbeard's first mate and changed her name to Rapier Rina. She wasn't quite sure what a rapier was, but the name sounded cool.

The pirates tried to plunder a town. Vicky, however, would have none of it, since the town they tried to plunder was their siblings, and the gold they stole were their Blank Expressions cards.

When they got kicked out of Vicky's room, they decided to hunt for buried treasure. They made a quick map and followed it, which, of course, led them straight to the basement!



## Chapter 2: The Enchanted Forest

Ed followed Grandpa to the tree house, which wrapped entirely around the tree. They climbed the ladder and ran around the tree twice – counterclockwise. A misty portal appeared in the tree. Grandpa and Ed quickly stepped through.

They emerged in a beautiful forest. The trees sparkled as stardust coated their trunks. The leaves were every possible shade of lush green. Laughter and music filtered through the trees, some far away, some nearer. The sun shone brightly overhead and glinted off two wicked steel blades that were pointed at them. The centaurs holding them glared at the intruders until they realized who they were.

They both lowered their swords, and the centaur on the right spoke respectfully. “I apologize, Wise One. I did not realize it was you and your grandson.”

Vicky had once commented on how most of the people in the other worlds called Grandpa Eddie ‘Wise One.’ Ed didn’t think it that odd as Eddie was the leader of the Gatekeepers. He was quite possibly the most powerful man in the worlds. Then he looked at his grandfather, who’s attire for hunting an intruder through an enchanted forest included pink bunny slippers. Perhaps the title ‘Wise’ didn’t quite suit him.

Eddie patted the centaur’s side which seemed to make the creature decidedly uncomfortable. “Quite all right, Manes. The forest is on alert. We’ve come to help.”

“Good,” Manes replied. He pointed to the other centaur. “Does your grandson know Hooves?”

Ed bowed. “I do now. Glad to meet you.” He turned back to Manes, who seemed to be in charge. “Shall we get to work? We need any information you have.”

“That would be almost none,” the centaur admitted. “There have been sightings of a humanoid in a dark cloak. We have placed guards around the Spring of Life and Crystal City, but he has not been seen near the normal places humans go. We are not sure what he is here for.”

Ed nodded politely even though the centaur wasn’t much help. “Then show us where he was last spotted and we shall see if we can track him.” He kept his tone polite, even though he felt he was expressing an obvious solution.

Hooves haughtily stamped on the ground. “If the Enchanted Forest folk have not yet tracked him down, nobody can.” He paused after this statement as if waiting for someone to affirm or applaud it. When no agreement was forthcoming, he continued, “There are no better trackers than Sprites. They know the forest better than all but the centaurs. We will take you to the Crystal City to where the last sighting was, but it would be better for you puny humans to watch for flares. They should be shot up if the intruder is spotted.”

Manes discreetly kicked his younger companion and muttered something about respect for the old, frail one.

Ed was awestruck as they went deeper into the forest. He seldom got to go to the Enchanted Forest, for humans are not allowed as a general rule. The Gates came there only when their help was needed, which the forest people rarely admitted.

He couldn't wait to get to the Crystal City. He'd only seen it once before when he was very young. He remembered being terrified of King Rolander, but a griffin is a very intimidating creature, even to a full-grown man.

Now he looked forward to seeing the admittedly crabby king again.

They walked past a beautiful pool of sparkling water. Silk-clothed nymphs and dryads were dancing around and singing a bright song, as they are wont to do. The animals danced merrily along and the flowers burst into bigger blooms as if soaking in energy from the tune.

Ed watched in fascination, but the centaurs gave the lighthearted play a hard look that was reminiscent of Aunt Sally.

A unicorn and Pegasus both stood drinking placidly from the pool. The sun's rays sparkled off the unicorn's crystalline horn, scattering the scene with broken rainbows.

"Are their horns really made of diamonds?" Ed asked with awe in his voice.

"Yes." Eddie's old face smiled in amusement at his grandson's awe. Eddie had been around a long time; nothing awed him anymore.

Hooves laughed scornfully. "That is not entirely true. Humans would call the horns diamonds, but it is one crystal. It is harder than diamonds, stronger than steel, more reflective than silver, and each unicorn's horn has a slightly different color to it. The color is pale, but there is a hint of color in all unicorn horns."



Ed was fascinated. “What colors?”

Hooves smiled knowledgeably. “White, silver, purple; it could be anything. It depends on the personality and lineage of the particular unicorn.” The centaur seemed to find it amusing that Ed took such interest.

Ed glanced back at the unicorn and noticed the horn did shine as if illuminated by a light similar in color to Zoe’s eyes. “Do you think the intruder could be after the unicorn’s horn?” he asked.

Hooves snorted. “Of course. It is the second biggest reason people come here. The horns are worth a king’s ransom in almost any world.”

Ed’s eyes went almost as big as Zoe’s when she wanted something. “What is the biggest reason people come?”

“The Spring of Life,” the centaur said in what Vicky called a ‘duh!’ tone. “People think if they drink of it, they will become immortal.”

“Will they?” Ed asked.

Grandpa Eddie shrugged. “It doesn’t seem like a good reason to me. Who’d want to live forever? Besides, the pastries are much better on the other side.”

Hooves glared, very respectfully, at the old man. “No, they do not live forever, but the spring does have amazing healing powers. A human who drinks repeatedly from it can live five hundred to one thousand years.”

Manes smiled at Ed. “And who knows about the pastries?” the more affable centaur agreed.

Ed paused as he took in what he'd heard. "You could cure most human illnesses. That's amazing. Why don't you sell it to the humans?"

Manes stopped beside him. "It would not be good to give water from the Spring of Life to humans," he explained. "Although it does give perfect health, it also has an effect on the mind for some species. If humans drank regularly of the spring water, they would become playful, carefree, and devoid of most thoughts as the Nymphs and Pixies. It would ruin your society, unless they wished to give up their technology and frolic in the forest."

Hooves nodded assent and added, "Only a few supreme beings, like centaurs, can drink from the spring and maintain their reason, unlike certain weak-minded humans."

Ed nodded. "I see. Don't drink from the spring unless it's a life or death emergency. It's good for the body, but bad for the brain." He seemed to recall that the Chronicles had said something about one of his ancestors giving up technology to frolic in the Enchanted Forest, and he wondered if that had been the cause.

They all started to walk again. They hadn't gone far when the centaurs stopped dead in their tracks.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked, every muscle in his body tensing to alert.

Hooves held up his hand. "Shh! There's trouble. Listen! If your weak ears can detect the difference."

Ed listened carefully, also noting that Hooves wasn't very creative when it came to insults. "I hear nothing."



“Exactly,” Hooves noted.

Ed nearly missed Hoove’s statement as the big centaur reared, whirling on his hind legs. He galloped back to the pool they had passed with Manes just behind him.

Ed and Eddie ran after them. The unnatural silence bore down on them, and they reached a scene with many forest creatures staring in shock at a wounded Dryad.

Hooves picked her up and placed her on Manes’s back. The nymphs and dryads who had been singing stood silently around and watched.

Ed broke the silence. “What happened?”

Hooves answered, “You shall have to find out as well as you can. She was wounded badly with this.” He pulled something from her shoulder and handed it to Ed. “We must get her to the Crystal City and the Spring of Life quickly or she will die.” Hooves and Manes both galloped off.

Ed and Eddie both watched them go. Then Ed looked at the item Hooves had handed him. It was some sort of dart that would be used in a blowgun. Ed smelled it. It had a strange, tangy smell. “I bet the scent is a poison,” he told Grandpa. “It appears our intruder is some sort of assassin. Any idea what world an assassin might come from?”

Grandpa Eddie shook his head no, his weathered features shrouded with sorrow. “There are too many worlds. I’m still wondering why anyone would attack a dryad.”

A nymph stepped forward. Her eyes were blank and expressionless, despite the attack she had witnessed. Ed realized what the centaur had meant about the Spring of Life.

The nymph batted her eyes and cocked her head. With a merry voice, she said, “The man in the black cloak was over there.” She gestured elegantly toward the trees. “He stepped out and shot the thing over there.” She pointed to the pool where the unicorn and Pegasus had been drinking. “Mirth jumped over to try to catch whatever was going to hit the animals, but she got hit with it instead.” She giggled. “That wasn’t very smart.”

Ed said nothing as the nymphs and dryads returned to their singing. He analyzed the information. Grandpa Eddie started searching the area where the unicorn and pegasus had been. “Come here, Ed. It’s high time you learn how to tell unicorn and Pegasus tracks apart.”

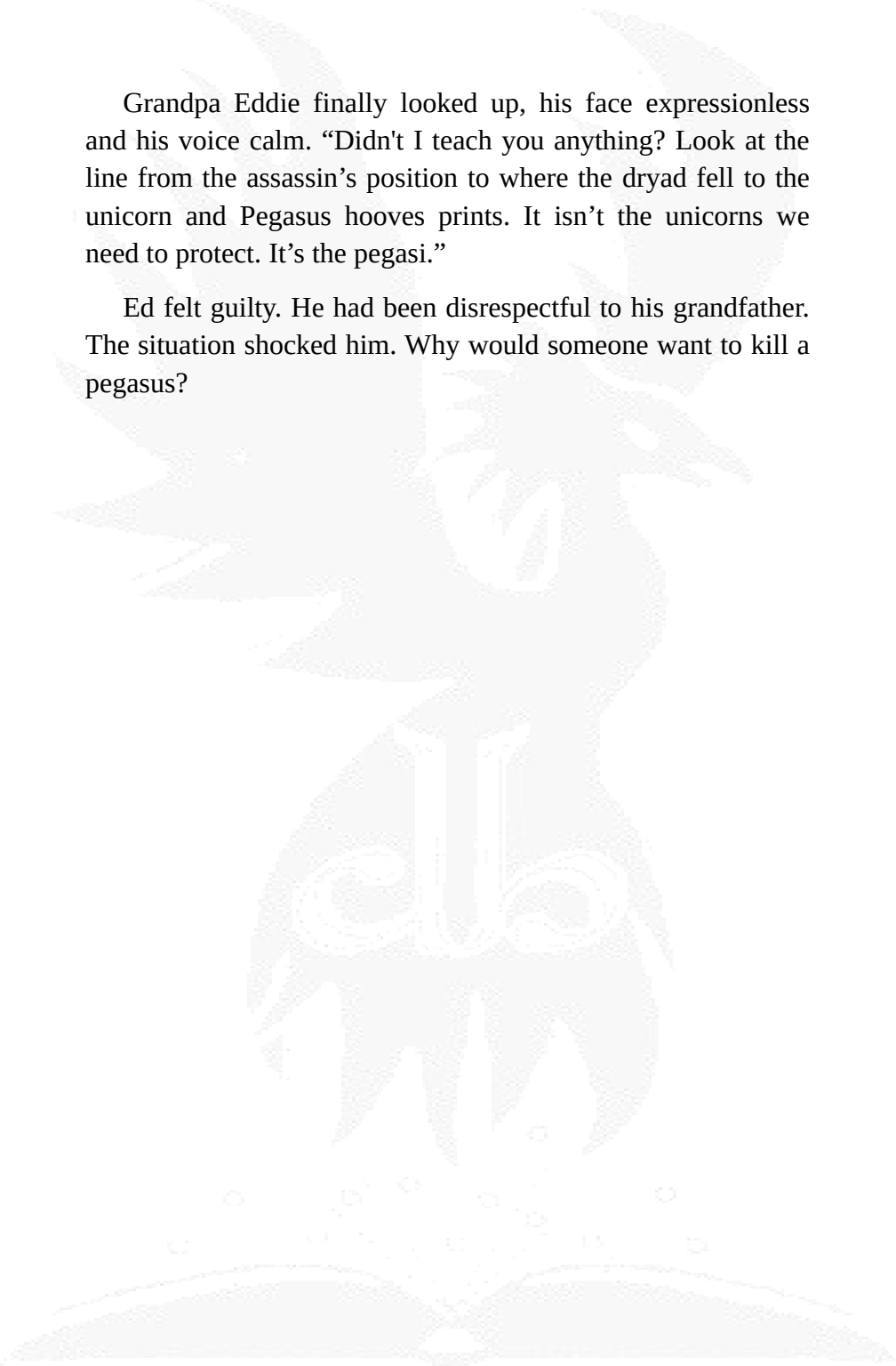
“So, the intruder is after the unicorn’s horn,” Ed sighed as he joined his grandfather.

“The deeper, cloven hooves belong to unicorns,” Eddie explained. “The lighter, horse-like ones belong to the pegasus.”

“I think we should set off a flare and tell everyone to watch the unicorns,” Ed proposed.

Grandpa didn’t look up. “Fido, do you think Rex can follow?” he murmured, apparently to his pink bunny slipper. He was studying the ground where the dryad fell, and the other slipper was missing. “We should set off a flare,” the old man suggested. “But I don’t think there’s a need to protect the unicorns.”

Ed’s face turned red with astonishment. “Unicorns are peaceful,” he protested. “We must help protect them.”



Grandpa Eddie finally looked up, his face expressionless and his voice calm. “Didn't I teach you anything? Look at the line from the assassin's position to where the dryad fell to the unicorn and Pegasus hooves prints. It isn't the unicorns we need to protect. It's the pegasi.”

Ed felt guilty. He had been disrespectful to his grandfather. The situation shocked him. Why would someone want to kill a pegasus?