

Prologue

Spid, the demon troll, leaned against the polished black marble of the imperial throne set atop a stalagmite in a massive chamber, miles below the surface of the earth. With great satisfaction, he looked down at his minions marching on the pockmarked lava flows of the Plain of Misery. He, the Exalted Garboon, had recruited a vast army of demons, ogres, trolls, skrees, grammits, and gronks.

Turning to the squat, muscle-bound ogre beside him, he chortled. "It won't be long now, Yurk. All of Earth will be ours."

"Yeah, boss. All of it. Ours." A glob of green drool slid from the protruding lower lip of Spid's second in command. Small, beady eyes, out of place on his massive chopped-meat face, darted from side to side as if yanked on strings.

Acrid smoke from smoldering coal torches rose along with a hellish mantra from the assembled multitude below. The guttural cry echoed among the stalactites that hung far above. "Heek, Hak, Hophul, Heek, Hak, Hophul." Spid bowed his head in reverence, translating the ancient words into English, the language he'd mastered in order to communicate with those he would soon dominate. "If we take it, it is ours."

Raising his head, he squinted into the gray, reeking air and saw a thousand skrees circling in formation, hungry to rip the flesh from their opponents, razor sharp talons flexing in rhythm with the beating of their featherless wings. Their limited vocal chords could not form the words of the chant, so they were content to scream their own names at deafening volume. "Skree, Skree, Skree!"

It's taken me hundreds of years to achieve this, Spid thought as he watched another wave of troops pass his reviewing stand. It's taken every waking moment since the last convergence of the full moon, the planets, the summer solstice and the mating dance of the Darksuckers, the inhalers of perpetual night.

“But I’ve brought them all together,” he muttered. “Through bargaining, bullying and bloodshed, I’ve bent them all to my will, honed them for the battle to come.”

He scowled and twirled the thick ring encircling his stubby forefinger. The stone glittered like a snake's eye. Yes, his troops were ready for the battle.

But before that battle, he must meet the challenge that would open the portal to the outer world. If he missed his opportunity, it would be hundreds of years before he could attempt to breach that portal again. It might be a millennium before he, Spid the Devious, son of the Troll King Glaub the Wrathful and his captive consort Dismalia, queen of the gammits, could bring enlightenment and discipline to the creatures of Above Skin. Perhaps a millennium before the power of the Darksuckers could be harnessed for the good of . . . well . . . of him, Spid.

He scowled again. Only two people stood between him and his dream – a mere boy and his younger sister.

Chapter One

Noah Keene knew better than to look directly into the setting sun – his mother had warned him many times – but he couldn't stop himself. The distant corona of fire somehow helped to lock her image in his mind, to keep it from fading any more than it already had. And doing something she'd cautioned against almost let him hear her voice.

"Ow." He felt the red laser of sunlight stab his brain. "You're right, Mom." Squeezing his eyes closed, he dug his fingers into the rough rock of the ledge, struggling to keep his balance as dancing stars lit up inside his eyelids. When they twinkled out, he shaded his eyes with his right hand and moved his gaze back to a spot on the blue-green water just short of the sunset. The whitecaps lapping at the horizon had doused a quarter of the orb's fire, but the rest of it raged crimson against the cloudless Oregon sky.

He wondered, as he watched the fireball slowly slide into the ocean, if someone, maybe someone his age and feeling as lonely as he did, was watching the sun come up in an eastern sky. Where would that sky be? He tried to remember his geography and time zones. Three to the east coast, three more to England? Then a few more. Maybe some kid in the Middle East. Perhaps an Israeli girl on one of those communal farms. What did they call them? Kibitzers? Kibbutz? Yes, that was the word. Or perhaps a Russian boy, staring out an apartment window at first light, wondering what was ahead for him and his family. Just as Noah wondered what was ahead for his.

Not that he thought of them as a family anymore, not since his mother died. More like three people living in separate dimensions within the same house – him, his father Sean, and Abby, his younger sister. Dad, silent,

unsmiling, on edge, and working too hard; Abby lost in her world of books and chess; and him hammering the drums hour after hour, trying to drown out the silence that filled the house.

A passing gull canted its wings and for a second hovered eye-to-eye with Noah, the June breeze puffing its feathers slightly. "I don't have anything for you." Noah held up his empty hands and the bird swooped away, gliding toward a nearby outcropping where dozens of other gulls hunkered over their nests. Noah smelled their gamy aroma mixing with the sharp scent of the low evergreens at his back and the rank and salty smell of what the tide had deposited on the beach below.

A thin rind of orange sun remained. Noah let his eyes slide past it, looking north up the coast. He spotted two fishing boats, stragglers from the small fleet at Port Anvil, heading toward twin jetties bent like beckoning fingers into the Pacific. *They're running wide open*, he thought, watching their bows slap the waves. Racing the night.

His eyes followed the jetties to the shore, to the broad curving sweep of sand that began at Massacre Rock and dead-ended into Humbug Mountain. A few beachcombers meandered along the tide line, searching for agates, sand dollars or other treasures overlooked by others.

He thought about the stone Abby had plucked from the surf two days ago. The size of a softball, it seemed to glow with an almost lunar light. Not quite opaque and not quite translucent, and polished smoother than any piece of quartz he'd ever found on the beach. It almost seemed to quiver and pulse in Abby's hands, and when he'd touched it, it had felt warm, too warm for a rock just pulled from the ocean's chilly grasp. But perhaps that had been his imagination. Maybe tonight, now that school was out, he'd get out the rock and mineral book and try to identify it.

Noah glanced at the vinyl-banded Timex on his wrist. Almost nine. Almost curfew. He knew he needed to head home. Dad would be hacked off. As usual. But he wouldn't say anything, just point to the kitchen clock and motion for Noah to go to his room. Noah vowed that tonight he wouldn't bite his tongue and slouch off in silence. Tonight he'd answer back, force his father to talk.

"Rules are rules, Noah," he spun the scene out in his mind, hearing his father's words. "When I make them, I expect you to follow them."

"But dad, tomorrow's Saturday," he'd argue. "And school got out today."

"Makes no difference. Nine o'clock is late enough."

"Dad, it's summertime. It's still light outside. And I'm sixteen years old."

"Horsehockey, Noah. Nine o'clock."

"But, Mom would have—"

And that would be the end of it. "I said, enough!" After the final words, his father's face would compress into the grim mask he'd worn ever since he and Noah's mother came back from the doctor's office the day before Noah turned fourteen. Cancer. She'd been gone more than a year.

Maybe tonight, he could make Dad see that time had passed. He wasn't fourteen anymore. Noah considered different strategies. What if he said, "Abby and I are growing up, we should be allowed to help make the rules."

No, that wouldn't work. His father wouldn't listen. There was no point in even trying to talk to him anymore.

He kicked at a clump of ferns sprouting from a crevice beside the ledge. "It wasn't fair!" A frond broke off and twirled toward the rocks below. "It isn't fair."

It didn't seem like Abby missed Mom as much as he did. But then, Abby, after an initial tantrum, had always been more willing to accept what she couldn't change.

Thirteen years old going on thirty, Dad called her. At school they had her doing college math. Calculus, no less. Noah had heard one of his teachers call her a child prodigy. He knew that meant she was way ahead of everyone else, including him. Not that he thought he was dumb or anything. But sometimes his little sister made him feel almost backward. She could already smoke him at chess, spotting him two pawns and still making short work of him. Of course, she did that to most everybody; she was one of the best players in the state.

Even though his nickname for her was Ab-normal, most times he was proud of Abby for her brains. He wouldn't let her help him with his math homework, though. No way. They'd fought about that more than once. Abby could be a little pushy. But Noah wouldn't back down. Stubborn as a starfish clinging to the pier, Dad had once said. That's where Abby got her nickname for him. No-way, she called him.

Noah got his feet under him and stood, glancing south along the coast to the mountain. Strange to be able to see the grassy strip and the rocky knob at the top. Most of the time a layer of fog covered that. He'd always thought of Humbug Mountain as mysterious, even spooky, but today, silhouetted against the darkening sky, it seemed almost ordinary. There were lots of stories about the mountain, about sightings of the hermit, and Sasquatch and even the ghost of Noah's musical idol, Felix Delacroix. A young, gifted jazz drummer, Delacroix had blazed through the music world twenty years ago, playing to sell-out crowds and making half a dozen inspired recordings. He'd married a talented young actress, learned to fly, and was on a honeymoon tour of America when their small plane, tossed by a near-hurricane-intensity storm, had crashed into the side of the mountain a month before Noah was born. Neither had been found.

When Noah had been younger, he'd believed every tale about Humbug Mountain – rumors of people hearing Delacroix's moans on the wind as he called his wife's name over and over, stories of hikers sighting a woman melting in and out of the coastal mist in the dense woods of the lower slopes. Now, at sixteen, Noah was inclined to think the stories were just things people had imagined when they were tired or had had too much to drink.

A cool breeze made him shiver and he became profoundly aware of how alone he was, high above the beach, above the foaming surf and the sharp rocks far below. He felt queasy, and for one scary moment, as if forces beyond his control might push him over the edge. A small voice, harsh and taunting, rose from a dark and hopeless place deep within him. "You won't even feel it. Do it. Why not? Dad won't miss you. Do it."

"No!" He backed away from the edge. He'd promised Mom he'd be strong, believe in himself. She never gave up, right to the very end. Noah couldn't let her down.

Hurriedly, he shrugged into his backpack and scabbled up the brushy trail hacked into the cliff face. The ledge where he'd watched the sun's descent was fifty feet below the edge of the bluff and the Cape Misfortune lighthouse. Standing up there, you couldn't see anyone on the ledge because of the gorse and Scotch broom plants and a natural brow of rock that jutted out. Noah thought of the ledge as his secret spot, but he knew he wasn't the only person who used the rocky hideaway. Often he found cigarette butts, beer cans and fast-food wrappers. He would pick the litter up and cart it away, furious at those who left it behind. How could you trash a place that was so beautiful?

Noah climbed the last fifteen feet hand over hand, automatically finding grips and footholds he'd used hundreds of times before. At the top, he levered himself up and around to a sitting position to take a final look at

the purple light that smudged the horizon. "Goodnight, Mom," he whispered, wiping a solitary tear from his eye with the back of his wrist.

Clambering to his feet, he strode to the porch of the old lighthouse keeper's cabin where he'd chained his bicycle. He covered large chunks of the rocky ground with his long-legged gait, but several times he snagged his toes and once he fell to his knees. God, he was awkward these days. He hoped he'd outgrow it, but feared he'd go directly from being a spaz teenager to being a spaz grown-up.

He unchained the bike, wrapping the chain around the seat stem and securing it with the combination lock. Running the bike a couple of steps to build momentum, he threw his leg over and started the fifteen-minute ride home. Sometimes he felt like a baby, still riding a bike. All of his friends were learning to drive. Their parents and older brothers and sisters gave them lessons. But Dad wouldn't let him behind the wheel. Dad said he was too young, too careless, too oblivious to what went on around him. He'd argued about that, but Dad ignored his protests.

The last thirty yards he had to stand on the pedals to make it up the steeply sloping street. Panting, he hopped off and walked the bike up the driveway, catching sight of Abby lounging in the porch swing, reading by the light of the yellow bulb beside the front door. As he came around a gnarled rhododendron bush, he noticed that his father's pick-up wasn't in front of the garage. Good. Maybe he'd escape the curfew lecture. He laid the bike over on the barren, untended lawn and let himself down onto the concrete steps, calf muscles twitching from the ride. "Hey, Ab-normal. Where's Dad?"

Abby didn't look up from her book, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Theoretical physics, she'd explained when Noah asked. He wondered if she really enjoyed it, or felt like she had to read egghead stuff

like that to meet everyone's expectations. Personally, he liked science fiction and mom's favorites, murder mysteries.

"He's out," she said without looking up.

"Well duh, Abby. I know that. His truck's not here."

"Oooohhh. Amazing powers of deduction, Dr. Watson." She raised her right hand and twirled a strand of ebony hair around the forefinger, eyes still focused on the book.

He sighed. "Okay, Sherlock, where's out?"

"The movies."

Noah felt his eyes widen. His father worked, cooked their meals, labored in his vegetable garden and read books about history. Serious business. "But, he hasn't been to a movie—"

"—since way before Mom died." Abby finished the sentence and set the book aside. "And he has a date. Cool, huh?"

Noah felt the words tear into his heart. A date? But what about mom? "Who? Who did he go out with?"

"Mrs. Ramsden from down the block."

Noah felt a surge of relief. "That's not a date. She's married."

"Nuh uh. She's divorced, No-way. Don't you ever pay attention to what's going on around you? Mr. Ramsden left six months ago. Moved to California with that lady who used to work at the souvenir shop."

No. No. No. The word pounded through Noah's brain.

"Anyway, they drove up to Coos Bay to see the new Julia Roberts flick. It's supposed to be funny. I hope it makes Dad laugh." Abby, who usually chose her words wisely and used few of them, had gone into her other conversational extreme, motor-mouthing. "He left you some meatloaf in the refrigerator. And Mrs. Ramsden brought us chocolate chip cookies. With nuts. I divided

them up, fifty-fifty. Yours are in the sack on the counter. She wants us to call her Jennifer."

"Never. No way!" Noah leaped to his feet and tore open the screen door.

"Noah, where are you going?" Abby called after him.

"Inside," he shouted. Passing through the kitchen, he seized the sack of cookies and slammed it into the wastebasket. "No!"

Abby sighed, set the book aside, retrieved the sack of cookies and returned to the porch. Munching, she lay back in the swing, tapping one foot to the wild beat of Noah's drumming. Even though he'd put up makeshift soundproofing, lining the walls and windows of the garage with leftover egg cartons, it barely dampened the thumps, thuds and crashes he created. Tonight the noises were louder than usual, discordant and arrhythmic. *He's angry*, she thought, *angry that Mom's gone, angry that Dad doesn't seem to hear us, angry that it can't be like it used to be.* Sometimes Abby wished she could let it all out like Noah did, scream at the top of her lungs, hit something, anything, run down the beach until she collapsed with exhaustion. But she couldn't.

Abby remembered one of the last conversations she'd had with her mother. She could almost hear Mom's voice, feel her soft hand against her forehead. "You're the one with all the common sense in the family, Abby. You're the logical one. It's up to you to help your Dad and Noah keep it together when I'm gone."

She ate another cookie, closed her eyes and imagined her mother again, telling her the story about Noah's first drum. A Christmas present from Aunt Susan, it had been nearly as big as the two-year-old boy who'd unwrapped it. An hour later, he was keeping time to Christmas carols

and leading their old dog, Ranger, in a parade around the house.

By the time Abby was old enough to have memories of her own, Noah had a complete drum kit. Through the years, he'd saved money to buy congas, timbales, and other percussion paraphernalia at yard sales and second-hand stores up and down the coast. He'd even fashioned a Caribbean style steel drum out of an empty oil container they'd found on the beach. Mom had helped him clean it and found little mallets to strike it with.

I should go talk to him, Abby thought. *Tell him that I understand. Let him know that I hurt too, but we'll get through it together. His drumming and my math serve the same purpose. They're different sides of the same coin.* She knew he'd locked himself in and wouldn't hear her pounding on the door and she felt anger flare at the back of her head. Keeping the world away was easier for Noah than facing his problems and admitting that he might be part of them. He'd have a turntable spinning an old jazz or rock LP. With the heavy black Koss headphones plugged into the amplifier and the volume maxed out, Noah could ignore an H-bomb exploding next door.

She'd made the mistake of slipping on the headphones one time when he'd set them down. "Aoooooh," she'd howled, snatching them from her ears. She'd thought her head would explode. Noah had just grinned that silly grin - Mom's grin - and said, "I know, it rocks, doesn't it?" Maybe girls had more sensitive ears than boys.

She smiled. Girls had other skills, too. She darted to her room and got the nail file from the manicure kit Mom had given her. The simple knob lock on the side door to the garage was old and worn. In less than two minutes, she had it open. She slid inside and shut the door as quickly as possible. The neighbors had complained repeatedly about the volume of Noah's drumming.

The lingering aroma of old motor oil and rusty tools filled her head as she watched him play. He snapped out syncopated rolls and riffs, going from snare, to tom-tom, to cymbal, all the while keeping a steady thump, thump with the foot pedal on the bass drum. Although she didn't understand most of the music he played, she still knew that he was special, talented. Someday he'd make a name for himself; his picture would be on a poster like those stapled onto the egg carton walls. Keith Moon, long-haired and shirtless, sweating and attacking his drums. He'd played with a group called The Who. He was dead now. So was Buddy Rich, a lounge-lizard looking jazz drummer on the next poster. Next to that was Noah's favorite. Dela...Delaroy? She looked at the banner across the bottom of the poster. Delacroix, that was it. Lix Delacroix. Anyway, he was dead too. Crashed his plane into Humbug Mountain, Noah had told her somberly. She'd once asked him why he didn't like any live drummers. He'd just groaned, put his headphones back on and turned up the volume.

Noah hadn't seen her yet. No surprise. He liked to play with his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Told her it helped him feel the music. She moved closer to him, waving her arms, hoping, if nothing else, that the fanning air would distract him. No luck.

Finally, she walked around him, to where the snakelike black headphone cord plugged into an ancient Marantz amp. With her index finger, she punched the power button in. The tone arm skidded to a stop on the turntable.

"Hey, what the—Abby!" Noah bellowed. He opened his eyes, but kept his headphones in place. "What's the big idea?"

Abby leaped over and pulled one side of the headphones away from his ear. "We've gotta talk, dude. Take those things off."

He peered over the snare at his sister. “Nothin’ to talk about, Abby.”

“Horsehockey, Noah.”

Glaring, he thumped one more short and angry riff on the snare and cymbal, then set the sticks down. He nodded glumly and slid the headphones off, setting them carefully beside the drumsticks.

Abby jumped right in. “C’mon Noah, why can’t you cut Dad any slack?”

“Me cut *him* slack? Like he does for me with all his stupid rules? Hah.”

“You know what I mean. With him going out tonight with Jennifer. Mrs. Ramsden.”

She saw the veins in his neck stand out as he fought for control. “None of my business. He can do whatever he wants. It’s not like he cares about what I think.”

“Noah, maybe it will be good for all of us if Dad finds a lady he likes. Mom’s been gone more than a year now.”

“You don’t have to tell me how long she’s been gone! She made us a family, made everything all right. Your precious Jennifer can never replace her. Never.”

“I never said she could replace Mom. I just think—”

But by then, her brother had punched the amp’s on button, sheathed his ears with the headphones and begun thumping an insistent beat with the kick pedal of the bass drum. It vibrated so intensely she thought the face of the drum would burst. As he began a machine gun sequence on the other drums, he opened his mouth and howled at the top of his lungs. Abby started to reach for the off button again, but stopped herself. Maybe tomorrow they could talk. She covered her ears and backed out of the garage, closing the door carefully behind her.

* * *

Noah glanced at his digital alarm clock. Two a.m. He needed to leave soon. Tying his shoes, he considered what he should stuff into his green canvas backpack. Not a pack really, just a glorified book bag. Still he could cram in all the junk he'd need for the trip: three extra pairs of underwear, two T-shirts, socks, cut-offs, and fourteen dollars and seventeen cents left from mowing lawns. He suddenly regretted the eight dollars he'd spent on a movie and video games last weekend. No way of knowing he'd need it later, he thought glumly. No way of predicting something like this. The only thing left from last week's splurge was some salt-water taffy in a plastic bag. He tossed it into the pack along with a toothbrush and a mangled tube of toothpaste, a comb and a small block of spicy fragrance deodorant.

He glided silently to the kitchen, wrapped a slice of cold meatloaf in aluminum foil, snagged an orange from the bowl on the dining room table and filled his small canteen with water. Tiptoeing to the closet to retrieve his sleeping bag, he stepped on a squeaky board. He halted, holding his breath, hoping he hadn't awakened anyone.

The door to his father's room was closed. Around midnight, Noah had heard the pickup truck skid to a stop in the gravel driveway. Hunkering in his bed, he'd listened to his father whistle that "Jeremiah was a bullfrog" song as he walked up the steps. He and Mom used to embarrass Noah by singing that song at the top of their lungs when they were happy. Now it sounded like betrayal.

When Dad looked in on him, he'd pretended to be asleep. Dad had chosen silence, Noah reminded himself. He'd use the same weapon. The dead air had seemed to press in on him, making it hard to breathe.

It didn't matter now, he told himself. Nothing more to talk about. By the time Mrs. Ramsden moved in and took over, Noah would be long gone. He didn't need Dad

anyway. He didn't need anyone. He could make it all on his own.

Abby's door was also closed, which was unusual. She was skittish about the dark and generally slept with it open. He wished he could take one more look at her, but decided against messing with her doorknob. What if she heard him and woke up? She'd want to know where he was going. She'd argue with him. Wake Dad. He'd be grounded for the summer.

In a moment, he crept back to his room and paused to look longingly at his boom box and small collection of compact discs. No. No space. His drumsticks, strapped safely to his belt, would provide the only music he could carry with him.

Back in the living room, he stopped at the piano to look at a picture of his mother, slim and smiling, holding three-year-old Abby up to pluck an apple from the ancient tree in the backyard. Noah pulled a T-shirt from his backpack, wrapped the picture, and wedged it in the center of the pack where it wouldn't break. The photo of Mom and Dad in the porch swing he left on the piano. *Time to go*, he told himself. *But where?* He slipped the pack over his shoulder. *Somewhere. Anywhere.* For tonight it was enough just to be going away.

The bicycle lay where he'd left it. Carefully, he set it upright and walked it halfway down the driveway before hopping on and starting to pedal. The night was still clear; stars twinkled by the thousands and the moon shone brightly over his shoulder. *Not full*, he thought. In a few days, though. He wondered where he would be in a few days. California, maybe. Mom's sister, Noah's Aunt Susan, lived somewhere near Los Angeles. Maybe he'd go there.

He gripped the handlebars and pumped his legs harder. Could he ride all the way? How far was it? Five hundred miles? Eight hundred? What if he got a flat or the chain

broke? Well, then he'd have to hitchhike. Or walk. It didn't matter. As long as he kept moving.

At the stop sign at the bottom of the hill, he looked both ways and turned onto Old Coast Road. Off to his right, the black ocean rumbled, somehow louder in the stillness of the night. He heard the distant clang of a harbor buoy, sounding as lonely as he felt. The slender beam from the lighthouse swept above glistening whitecaps and shot over his head. He pedaled faster, faster.

His eyes on the revolving light, Noah didn't see the pothole until his front wheel rammed into it. He flew over the handlebars, his head thumped the pavement and blazing pain ballooned behind his eyes. Colors flashed through his head – reds and yellows and whites. A sharp throbbing drowned out all other sound.

“Owwwww!” Rolling from side to side, he clamped his hands to his forehead.

Eventually, the pain receded. He sat up slowly, rocking back and forth. On wobbly legs, he clambered to his feet. Taking several deep breaths, he tried to clear his head.

He was about to retrieve his bike when he heard quick footsteps behind him. Before he could turn, a hand clamped down on his shoulder.