

The day Charlie Cormac turned seven years old, he saw Bigfoot. Nobody believed him. Two years later, he saw a dragon cross in front of the moon and blow a stream of red hot fire. Again, nobody believed him. Then two weeks ago he saw a mermaid jump off a rock and into the waters of Lake Erie. To his great astonishment, nobody believed him.

"You ever hear the story of the boy who cried wolf?" Grandpa Bud asked him. "You're that boy, and one day real soon, it will come back to bite you in your rear end. There is no such thing as mermaids or big feet or whatever. Now leave me be! I'm watching my show."

Grandpa Bud was old and his gut was so big that when he ate ice cream in his favorite chair, it served as his own personal TV tray. There was a permanent place on his bald head that reflected the light of every episode of Wheel of Fortune he watched, which was all of them.

"Gran!"

"Don't you encourage this nonsense," Grandpa Bud scolded. "Stay in your lane, woman."

Gran ushered him quietly into the kitchen. The sweet smell of fresh bread filled the tiny space, and a plate of fresh cinnamon rolls sat on the table. Gran picked up the plate and offered him a roll. Charlie looked back cautiously toward the living room where Grandpa Bud sat glued to his recliner. He sometimes imagined his grandpa and the chair were actually one thing, a monster with giant teeth that could chew him up and spit him out.

"It's a special day, Charlie," Gran whispered. "Take one." Her kind smile warmed him as much as the cinnamon roll.

"Gran my birthday's not for a couple of months," suggested Charlie. No other day in this household would be considered special, not even his birthday really. One year Grandpa Bud gave him a new weed eater for his birthday. There was a note attached to it that said "The lawn better be trimmed and mowed by the time I get home." There was nothing special about Charlie, at least according to Grandpa Bud.

"You came to live with us 10 years ago today," Gran smiled. "Do you remember?"

"Gran, I was like 2 years old."

"Almost three," She chuckled and then covered her mouth to muffle the sound. They weren't allowed to laugh in the house, unless Grandpa Bud made a joke. His jokes weren't funny though, so they had gotten pretty good at their fake laughs. "That was a good day, Charlie. I wish we had more days like that. Your dad would have wanted to be here." Tears welled in her eyes. "You know, you are just like him, your dad. You don't look much alike, but you have his wonder."

"And my mom?" Charlie asked. "Anything?"

Deana Cormac left him with Gran and Grandpa Bud. There was no note, no I'll be back soon, no anything. His father died and she gave up on him. She left and he got stuck with Grandpa Bud.

"Those rolls done, woman?" Grandpa Bud yelled.

Gran smoothed out the apron she wore over her floral print moo moo and fluffed her perfectly set in place silver gray hair. "I left something under your pillow for you. Don't tell your Grandpa. I do love you Charlie, just remember that."

Gran kissed him on the forehead and then put on her best fake smile as she left the kitchen with the plate of cinnamon rolls.

Charlie stared at the cinnamon roll before he took a big bite. It was still warm. Gran

made the best cinnamon rolls. They were the closest thing he ever got to a real present. What could Gran have left under his pillow? There are things that any twelve year old boy would hope for; a cell phone, new video game, a baseball glove. But he wasn't sure Gran knew what video games or cell phones were, and even if she did, would she risk Grandpa Bud finding out?

Charlie wiped the crumbs from his face. He couldn't leave any evidence. He pushed open the kitchen door and walked out into the living room. "May I be excused to my room?"

He waited for an answer. Grandpa Bud always took his time.

"Your chores done? Garbage by the curb?"

"Yes sir," Charlie responded cautiously.

Grandpa Bud groaned. "Don't want to hear any racket up there."

Gran nodded and winked as Grandpa Bud's attention returned to his show.

Charlie wanted to race upstairs, to unearth the mystery of this once in a lifetime gift from his Gran, but he had to remember the rules; no running in the house and certainly no excessive noise. He made his way up the stairs, avoiding the creaks and groans of the wooden floors, like a thief avoiding red security beams guarding the rare sapphire diamond. His room was simple. There was a twin bed covered with a plain blue blanket, a small bed-side table with an old lamp set on top of it, bookcases filled with books no newer than 1987, and a small trunk where Charlie could keep his "junk," as Grandpa referred to it. It was once his father's room, but Charlie did not see the sense of wonder to which Gran referred.

He sat down on his bed, reached under his pillow, and pulled out a small square package. It was simple; no wrappings or bow, just a simple brown box. He opened it. Inside the box was a folded up piece of paper. Charlie pulled it out, then hesitated before he began to unfold it. The page crackled as he unfolded each layer until it was open. He took a deep breath.

*Dear Charlie,*

*If you are reading this, that probably means I am dead. I know you must have a ton of questions, questions I can not answer for you right now. What I can tell you now is... it is all REAL! Everything that you are seeing, everything that your grandfather says is nonsense or doesn't exist, is real. Don't worry he didn't believe me either. There will come a time when things will begin to change, and the world will open up before your eyes. Trust your gut and trust your mother. She will know what to do. This belonged to me...*

Charlie looked down at the package again. He pulled out a small, thin, rectangular piece of wood attached to an odd looking piece of rope. Carved into the smooth surface of the wood was a symbol; two horns but not the horns of an animal that he recognized.

*I want you to have it. Everything will make sense very soon. I'm sorry that things turned out this way and I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you. This world is a whole lot bigger than you realize.*

*Love you son!*

*Dad*

He laid down the note. Ten years with nothing from his Dad, then this? He rested his

hand on the piece of paper as a single tear hit his cheek. He held up the rope and stared at the small symbol carved into the piece of wood. He had never seen anything like it. It was most certainly glowing and seemed to pulse as it dangled in front of him. He silently wondered if his dad saw bigfoots or dragons or mermaids. If it wasn't his mind playing tricks on him. Could this be real?

"That's interesting!" A small voice called out.

Charlie jumped back on his bed, hitting the back of his head against the wall.

"Who's there?" He asked, rubbing the bump already starting to form.

"Me, obviously," said the little voice.

Charlie looked around but he still couldn't see anything or anyone. His mind must really be playing tricks on him.

"Yoo-hoo," a little hand reached up from the side of the bed. "Give me a hand here!"

Charlie rolled off the other side of the bed and hit the floor with a thud. Did he just see? Did it just talk?

"Or you can come down to me." Soft footsteps hit the ground like tiny little tap shoes as the voice came around the bed. "Are we okay then?" It asked.

Around the side of the bed came a tiny figure, no bigger than a standard garden gnome. But it wasn't a garden gnome. Garden gnomes didn't walk or talk, and they most certainly were not hairy with large horns.

"What are you?" Charlie asked.

"You would ask that question wouldn't you? Is it the pink hoodie? Not sure why, but it always throws people off. Everybody wants me to wear cute little overalls or hop around like a bunny rabbit. I ain't doing all that and in my opinion, no self respecting Peculiar would do such a thing. And as for your question, I'd like to think something a bit more appropriate would be "who are you" or "may I help you, you extraordinarily good-looking Peculiar?"

Charlie stood cautiously and sat on his bed. "Who are you then?"

"That's the one you choose? I like the one that included the extraordinarily good looking Peculiar part, but I guess I can't win them all." The creature started to pull on Charlie's blanket, attempting to hoist her tiny body up on the bed. "Name's Iris, Iris Pettlesmith."

"What do you want?" Charlie asked.

"I want to get up on this bed so I can have a proper look at you," Iris reached her hairy, blue hand up to Charlie again. Charlie grabbed her hand and hoisted her up. "There, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" She asked.

Charlie shook his head. His dad wasn't kidding. Things can change pretty quickly. "What's a Peculiar?"

"Well, that's a good question." Iris scratched her head, picking out a small bug that had been crawling around on her blue fur. She popped in her mouth and crunched it for a few seconds before swallowing. "How rude of me. Did you want one?"

Charlie held up a hand in protest as his stomach turned.

"Suit yourself." Iris popped another bug in her mouth and continued speaking.

"Peculiars...well...we are just...well Peculiar. Ya know?"

"Are you like a fairy or something?" Charlie asked.

Iris fell over on the bed clutching her heart. She wriggled and gasped for air. "I can't

brea...bleh." Her head rolled to the side and her tongue laid limp out the side of her mouth.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Charlie grabbed Iris' little shoulders and shook.

"What's this?" Iris bolted upright and grabbed the wooden rectangle from Charlie's grasp.

"Hey, that's mine, and I thought you were dead."

"Oh, no," Iris sniggered. "I just don't like being called a fairy. Dirty, nasty creatures those are. This is not yours, Charlie Cormac."

"Yes it...wait you know my name?"

"Sure do!" Iris smiled. "Bye!"

Iris jumped off the bed and bounded across the room, still holding the small rectangle necklace. She climbed up the bench seat, threw open the window, and jumped right out. Charlie ran to the window and looked down. Iris looked back up at him and held up the necklace, daring Charlie to follow him. There was no way he could climb down the tree outside his window fast enough. Without a second thought, He ran across the room and threw himself down the stairs. He flew past the living room to shouts of protest from Grandpa Bud. He ignored them. There was no way he was letting the gift from his father get away.

The morning air was warm as Charlie hit the pavement just outside of Gran's house on Jackson Street. He scanned the area, trying to locate the little thief, but it was still dark. Charlie gritted his teeth. The creature, or Peculiar, or whatever it was, stole the only thing he had ever gotten from his father.

"Iris!" Charlie yelled. "Iris!"

He ran down the street. The little thing could not have gotten far. As he turned the corner, he slowed his breathing and scanned the area again. There she was, looking up to the roof of Burger King. Charlie followed her gaze upward and his mouth fell open. He couldn't believe it was happening again, he wasn't sure he wanted it to happen again. Perched atop of Burger King was a giant blue dragon. Its wings were at least two hundred feet wide and its long tail stretched down from the roof to take up ten different parking spaces. The dragon's neck reached down from the roof to where Iris stood with the small rectangular necklace. It looked like she was trying to feed it to him.

"Stop!" Charlie yelled.

A little old woman walking her dog froze right in front of the Burger King driveway and looked at Charlie. She shook her head and kept on walking. She obviously didn't see the enormous dragon a couple of feet away and neither did her dog.

Iris looked back at Charlie and waved happily, like nothing she did was wrong. That only made Charlie angrier. The little creature patted the dragon's nose and pulled the necklace back, then the dragon jumped into the air and took to flight, vanishing from view in seconds.

Charlie rubbed his eyes and then pinched his skin. Maybe he WAS crazy, that or he was dreaming.

"Here you are young sir," Iris said with a smile.

Charlie looked up to the sky in astonishment. He couldn't be dreaming.

"Quite a sight, isn't she?" Iris asked. "That is, when she wants to be seen. She didn't quite like you stumbling in, but she'll get over it. I don't THINK she'll bite off your toes as you sleep. Dragons do like toes though."

"Wait, what?" Charlie looked frantically back at Iris.

“Well, you want this back or not?” Iris asked. “These Cruxes are quite valuable, ya know?”

“Crux?” Charlie grabbed the rope and pulled it over his head. “What’s a Crux?”

“That’s a loaded question, my boy,” Iris started walking. Charlie followed. “Not sure I should be the one to tell you.”

“Is this real?”

“As real as a dwarf’s appetite, as real as pixie wings,” Iris said to no response. “As real as my best friend’s bunions? No? Nothing?”

“Was that really a dragon?” Charlie pressed her.

“Sure was, and that right there, is a Vampire!” Iris grabbed Charlie’s hand and pulled him behind the large, metal Library sign.

“Let go of me and answer my question!”

Iris shushed him. She looked nervously around the side of the sign toward the front entrance to the library. Charlie peered around the other side of the sign. Leaning against the brick building was a tall man with pale white skin. Atop his head sat a midnight black fedora. He wore black pants, shiny red shoes, and a long, black overcoat with the collar turned up. He picked his teeth with a toothpick as he waited. A shiver ran down Charlie’s spine.

“Okay, don’t move!” Iris whispered.

“What? Why?” Charlie asked.

“I see the hair on your arms standing on end, Chuckie, and that’s for a good reason,” Iris grabbed Charlie’s face and turned it back toward the vampire. “If that’s who I think it is, we can’t be seen.”

“Why?” Charlie asked.

“Let’s just say vampires aren’t particularly nice, and that one, I may have crossed him a few years back.” Iris shuttered. “Not a guy you want to mess with.”

“You crossed him, not me,” Charlie started to stand.

“Wait!” Iris pulled him back down. “We got more. What do you suppose they want?”

Two creatures slightly bigger than Iris came stumbling around the side of the building. Their dark hair was matted and their eyes were bulging. One of them had broken horns and the other had a green goo coming out of his ear.

“Ugh, what are those things?” Charlie asked.

“Those are Anomalies. Mostly stupid and incompetent fools, but they don’t care about what happens to themselves so that makes them pretty dangerous.” Iris thought carefully. “I wonder what they’re up to?”

Charlie watched the biggest Anomaly wipe some of the green goo from his ear and flick it against the library wall where it stuck. “I really do not care what they are up to. I just want to go home. I got what I came for.”

“Well, you can’t right now, so, while we wait, why don’t we have a listen?” Iris winked. “Ever borrow?”

“Borrow what?”

“Pecu powers?” Iris shook her head. “Why do I even bother asking with that pops of yours? Real piece of work that one. Give me your hand.”

How did she know his Grandpa Bud? This was getting weirder and weirder. Charlie

considered Iris' hand for a minute. "Will it hurt?"

"Come on," Iris tapped her hand. "Do you want to listen or what?"

Charlie sighed and grabbed Iris' hand. The Peculiar gripped his hand tightly and suddenly noise exploded around him; buzzing of bees, the humming of street lights, a car rattling, voices of people he could not see. It was too much to handle, but Iris hung on. Suddenly everything quieted and all he heard was a single voice.

*"It's a simple question you idiot," the vampire sneered. "Do you have what I contracted you to retrieve?"*

*"Uh..." the smaller Anomaly hesitated. He chewed viciously on what was left of his yellow nails. "It is on the way, Mr. Silvan. Isn't that right, Grub?"*

*"Umm, what we do again?" Grub scratched his head absentmindedly.*

*Silvan lowered his head and squeezed the bridge of his nose in obvious frustration. "The stone better be in my hand in the next few minutes, or someone will pay. This heat does make me thirsty." Silvan flashed his fangs.*

*The three creatures chuckled nervously. "It will be here, Mr. Silvan, I...I...I promise."*

*"How can fire be in a stone anyway?" Grub asked with one finger up his nose.*

Iris let go of Charlie's hand.

"That was getting good," Charlie said. "Why did you let go?"

"Did he just say Fire Stone?" Iris asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, I mean I think," Charlie replied.

"You think?" Iris looked over at the group of Anomalies again. "We have to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

A man came around the far side of the library. He had long black hair and deep set eyes. A long black trench coat dragged on the ground as he walked.

Iris grabbed Charlie's hand. Sound exploded in his ears once more, then died away.

*"I told you he would come," the first Anomaly screeched.*

*"Good, Kagswod," Silvan smirked. "Let's just hope he comes through, for your sake."*

*The man approached with lumbering footsteps.*

*"Where's my money?" he asked in a thick southern accent.*

*Silvan turned to Kagswod. "You brought me a human?"*

*Kagswod chewed his nails again.*

*"So what's it to you, anyhow?" the man asked. "I got whatchew wanted, now you give me what I deserve."*

*Silvan smirked. "You will get what you deserve when you show me the stone."*

*The strong willed man maintained his hard stance while Kagswod continued to chew his nails furiously. Finally the man relented.*

*"This gave me quite a bit of trouble," the man said, pulling a small bag from his pocket. He reached in the bag and pulled out a large stone. The light from the street lamps reflected off its polished surface and a slight red glow seemed to emanate from its center. "I think I deserve a bit more gold for this one."*

*Silvan smiled viciously, and then vanished on the spot. He appeared again behind the man holding the stone. The vampire forced the man's head sideways and sunk two large vampire fangs into his neck. The man stiffened and then fell to the ground with a loud thud.*

*Silvan pulled a white cloth from his pocket and wiped the blood from his lips. "Such a waste," he sneered as he bent down and picked up the stone. He examined it with a look of reverence then stuffed it in his jacket pocket. "You have succeeded, and I will remember that."*

*"We done good?" Grub asked stupidly.*

*Kagswod elbowed his companion.*

*"You will be remembered for this, by myself, and by him."*

Iris pulled her hand away again.

"You weren't kidding," Charlie rubbed his ears as they returned to normal. "Did he really just kill that guy?"

"Shhh," Iris said.

"What? They have ultra-hearing too?"

Iris didn't reply. She was deep in thought. Charlie waited.

"This is not good," Iris broke her thoughts.

"Yeah, Silvan or whatever, just killed that guy."

"No, listen," Iris said intensely. "This is what I need you to do. I don't have much time. Stay here and stay hidden. If you value your life, you will stay out of sight. When it's done, go home and pretend this never happened!"

"What do you mean pretend this never happened? What are you talking about?"

Iris crushed something in her hand. "This will only take a few moments to kick in. Stay safe, stay hidden." She opened her hand and blew a fine powder into Charlie's face. It sparkled in his eyes as he took a heavy, deep breath. Iris put one small hand on Charlie's cheek and gave him an apologetic look. After a moment, she released him and strode around the sign toward the library.

Charlie inched himself over toward the edge of the sign as his head began to swirl. He watched Iris avoid being taken by the bigger Anomaly. She spoke but Charlie could not make out what she said. Charlie's eyes blurred and his ears began to ring. He fought it off. Iris approached the vampire who vanished and reappeared right behind her. She rolled out of the way, right into the Anomaly's grasp.

Silvan smiled and spoke softly to her as she struggled to free herself from Grub's strong grip. Charlie heard Silvan laugh menacingly, then he vanished into a puff of black smoke, emerging as a giant bat, and flew off over top of the library.

Charlie felt the warmth of the morning sun creep over his body. The Anomalies walked toward Charlie's hiding place, still imprisoning Iris between them. Charlie tried to move but dizziness overwhelmed him. The Anomalies stopped short of the sign and Charlie made eye contact with Iris. To his surprise, she smiled ever so subtly at him and winked. Then Charlie saw something in her hands. It was the stone the man gave to Silvan. She took it. But how? How did she get the stone?

Darkness crept into the edges of Charlie's vision. He tried to focus.

"This what you get for meddling," Kagswod screeched. "Do it, Grub!"

Grub lifted Iris into the morning sun. Instantly her body began to stiffen, turning into

stone in the sunlight. A smirk remained on her stone face, the Fire Stone firmly in her grasp. Then in one giant heave, Grub launched the stone Iris into the middle of the parking lot, scattering her into a thousand pieces.

Charlie's eyes went dark.