

Charlie woke to the sound of a light tapping. He was back in his room, curled up on his bed. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he sat up slowly.

More tapping.

He turned around and his best friend sat outside his window with the biggest smile he had ever seen. He wrenched himself up, walked over, and opened the window.

"What is wrong with you, Chuckles?" Alice asked. "Do you know what today is?" She climbed through the window. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail that hung below a baseball cap and she wore a T-shirt that said "Do You Believe in Magic?"

"What time is it?" Charlie asked, ignoring her question. "I had the weirdest dream."

"Half hour till school starts, Chuckie." She threw him his book bag. "Let's go!"

"Hold on," he said as parts of his dream began to drift back to his mind. "I know I have asked you this before, but do you believe in like, dragons, or vampires, or whatever?"

"I'm pretty sure my shirt has already answered that question. Now, let's go!" She pulled him toward the window.

"Can I at least get dressed?"

"Chuck," she said, gesturing toward him.

He looked down at himself. He was already dressed; socks, shoes, everything.

"You are out of it," she felt his forehead. "Well you better snap out of it 'cause seventh grade awaits its queen. Come on! Let's go!"

"The window?"

"Grandpa Bud?"

She had a point. The window it was then. He and Alice had been best friends ever since they were little. It was pretty much standard practice for her to climb up the tree next to the house to come visit him. Charlie just hadn't done much climbing out and this time it wasn't like he was chasing a weird creature that had stolen from him. He could have sworn that was real. His mind raced back and forth between the dream and the now. If it wasn't real then it was the strangest dream he had ever had, and that was saying something. More than a couple times his dreams had been what anyone would consider strange or weird. Like the one where he saw everything in the world upside down or when he was trying to have a conversation with a mermaid through a large glass wall. Weird dreams were commonplace for Charlie Cormac.

Alice snapped him back to reality and helped him out the window. His best friend was at home in a tree. She was quick and agile, and she had climbed down before Charlie could make up his mind which way to go.

"What are you so excited about anyway?" Charlie asked as he finally jumped down and they began walking.

"Oh come on, Charlie," she nudged him with her shoulder. "Start of a new year! Plus I get to play on the basketball team this year. 'Bout to go 10-0!"

Alice was an athlete. She ran circles around the boys in pretty much every sport. She tried out for the football team last year and would have made it even as a 6th grader, but the coach told her she couldn't play because she was only in 6th Grade. Everybody knew it was because she hurt a couple of the boys at the tryout though.

"What are you gonna do this year?" She asked.

"Lay low!" he answered.

“Come on! Live a little!”

“You know they don’t have a baseball team, Ali,” he said. Baseball was the only sport he played. He wouldn’t call himself good at it, but he could hold his own. Without a baseball team, laying low was the perfect option for Charlie. He didn’t want a repeat of 6th grade; his arms couldn’t take anymore bruises from Cass Cillian, the biggest jerk in the school. He liked to pick on everyone but Charlie seemed to be his favorite target. Laying low and avoiding Cass Cillian was his number one objective for the new school year.

“Good thing too,” Alice smirked. “I would just whoop your butt in that too!”

She was right.

They approached the Library about half way to school. The dream shot back into his mind again and he spotted something plastered against the brick wall. He altered his course and started toward the library. He needed to be sure that it was a dream.

“Where you going?” Alice called after him.

“I want to check something,” he answered back.

He approached the library slowly, not sure if he should worry about a group of weird creatures jumping out to try and crush him too. He would rather face Cass Cillian on a daily basis than deal with a vampire. As he got closer to the wall, the object materialized. It was green and slimy, and it clung to the wall like a giant booger. It oozed and bubbled, and stank like nothing he had ever smelled before.

“Eww, what is that?” Alice came up behind him. “It looks like...”

“A giant booger,” Charlie finished her sentence.

“Well, I mean yeah!”

“I think it was real, Ali!” Charlie said. He wasn’t sure if he should be excited or scared. If vampires were real, well, then that was freaky.

“What are you talking about?” Alice asked.

“Hold on.” Charlie started to scan the parking lot, looking for pieces of the Peculiar, Iris. It was real and he was going to prove it. He walked back and forth in the parking lot, searching for any sign to prove that he wasn’t crazy. This could change everything. Everyone would have to believe him and it would feel so good to prove Grandpa Bud wrong.

“What is going on? What was real? You’re freaking me out more than normal, Chuck,” Alice said tugging on his jacket.

Charlie stopped. “I’m telling you, Ali. It’s all real. This creature came into my room this morning and stole something from me.” He just now thought of losing the only thing that his father ever gave him. But she gave it back to him. He felt around his neck for the rope but it wasn’t there. “It was a gift from my Dad.”

“From your Dad? Chuck, your Dad is dead.”

“Thanks for that,” Charlie sighed.

“No, I just mean...I just don’t understand how your Dad gave you something.” Alice tried to back track.

“Gran gave it to me. It was something my Dad wanted me to have, but it was stolen from me. I mean she gave it back but...”

“Who gave it back? This creature?” Alice asked.

“Yes! I chased after her and then I saw a dragon, and then we came over to the library and there was this vampire and an ugly little creature who flicked that booger or goo on the wall. Then something happened and they smashed Iris when she turned to stone because the sun came up.” He sucked in air.

Alice started laughing, then quickly stopped when she saw Charlie was serious. “You’re serious, Chuck, aren’t you? You are, like, really freaking me out now.”

Charlie set himself to looking for any piece of the shattered creature he could find, but there was nothing. It was almost like someone had swept the parking lot clean. It was cleaner than it should have been. But why would somebody do that?

“There’s gotta be something here,” he said.

“I’m just gonna go to school,” Alice started to creep away.

Then Charlie saw it, a piece of stone lying in the grass next to the cement, staring right back at him. He ran over and picked it up. It was a piece of Iris; her eye.

“Look,” he said to Alice.

He held out the small piece of stone and waited. Alice grabbed it and looked it over, then handed it back.

“So, do you believe me now?” he asked.

“Do I believe you that there was a stone statue smashed in this parking lot? I mean yeah I guess some weirdo who has a grudge against garden decorations could have smashed it here. It looks like one of those weird gnomes from your neighbor’s garden. ”

“No,” Charlie insisted. “I’m telling you the truth!”

“Right now, I just want to go to school,” Alice sighed.

He was going to get to the bottom of this, with or without Alice. It wasn’t just about proving he was right, it was about understanding the only thing his father ever gave him. It was about having something that connected him to his parents, just one thing. He needed to find it again, and more than that, he needed to understand what it all meant. Alice was right though, they needed to go to school. If he was late, Grandpa Bud would rip him a new one, and he would never have a chance to do anything ever again.

Finally he gave in. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Ugh, finally,” Alice said. “Maybe don’t go talking about these creatures when we get to school. Remember what you said; Lay low.”

Willow Middle School was the home to all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in Willowhaven. It was built in 2008 so it was pretty new. Sixth grade for Charlie was something he would like to forget about. Besides the daily bruises at the hands of Cass Cillian, he never really found his place. Everyone wanted to be Alice’s friend. She was pretty, a good athlete, and she got good grades, so all the teachers liked her too. Lucas, the only other kid Charlie called his friend, was goofy, a class clown type. So almost everyone liked him too, but he also missed a ton of school. The only reason Alice hung out with him was because they had grown up together. Their families had always been close. Alice’s Dad was a little older and knew Gran through the church. He was friends with Lucas only because they sat next to each other in first grade. Lucas had just moved to Willowhaven after being adopted and he was pretty shy back then. Nobody would call Lucas shy now though.

They walked into the main entrance two minutes before the 8 o'clock bell and rushed toward the seventh grade hallway. It was never a good idea to be late on the first day of school.

"Like seriously, Chuck, don't talk about the vampires or dragons or any of that stuff. If Cass hears you, you will never live it down. Whoa! Since when do we have a basement?" Alice stopped in front of a large set of stairs leading down to a lower level they never thought existed.

"Where did that come from?" Charlie asked

"Come on, let's get to class!" Alice pulled Charlie down the hallway. "We don't have time."

The first day of school was pretty uneventful. In fact, Charlie went the whole day without running into Cass Cillian. There were actually quite a few students missing, including Lucas but that wasn't much of a surprise. After school, he sat out in front of the library sign for a couple hours trying to catch a glimpse of one of the creatures that shattered Iris, but nothing came. He managed to dodge a bullet when he got home when he found out Grandpa Bud was working late. What Grandpa Bud didn't know, wouldn't hurt him, well, wouldn't hurt Charlie actually.

"Gran, can I ask you something?" Charlie asked tentatively.

Gran looked up from her work of preparing Grandpa Bud's dinner plate.

"I mean it might be a stupid question..."

"Stop right there, young man," Gran playfully scolded. "There are no stupid questions."

"I had a dream last night, well I don't think it was a dream. I think it was real but I don't know."

"Still waiting for that question, Charlie," Gran smiled.

"Did you give me a gift from my dad?" He asked.

Gran stopped and came to sit at the table with Charlie. "This is not the place to discuss that, Charlie."

"But you did give it to me?"

"Well, yes. I put it under your pillow. But why would you think that was a dream?" Gran asked.

Charlie swallowed hard. It wasn't the first time he had told Gran about these creatures. The last time she dismissed it completely, but Charlie banked on the fact that Grandpa Bud was also in the room.

Charlie swallowed hard and decided to put it all on the table. "This morning, right after I opened it...this thing took it from me, a Peculiar or something." He looked up at her as the smell of Gran's famous beef stew filled the kitchen. He wasn't sure how Gran would react, but the response he got, he never saw coming.

"Was her name Iris Pettlesmith?"

Boom!

The back door slammed shut and Grandpa Bud lumbered into the kitchen. Charlie stood up and pushed his chair under the table.

"Dinner ready?" He asked.

Gran stood and straightened her apron. "I'll bring it to you in your chair."

"I'll take it in here." Grandpa Bud pushed Charlie out of the way and sat at the table.

Charlie wanted to say something but Gran gave him a look of warning.

“Get out of my face, boy!” Grandpa Bud said as he shoveled beef stew into his mouth.
“Not your best, woman! How about some salt?”

Gran fetched the salt shaker. She snuck a glance at Charlie and ever so subtly motioned for him to go upstairs. He lost his chance.

“So, what do you think?” Alice asked him.

The next morning Charlie scooted out of the house early. Gran knew something about all of this which only confirmed to Charlie that he wasn't crazy. He wanted to talk to Gran but the opportunity never presented itself. Grandpa Bud was in a mood and he wasn't going to test that or get Gran into any trouble.

“About what?” Charlie responded.

“What's in the new basement, Chuck?”

He completely forgot about the mysterious set of stairs until they stood right in front of them again. They were looking down into a new floor at a school at which they had already spent a whole year.

“Let's check it out!” Alice suggested.

“I'm not sure we are allowed down there,” Charlie responded.

“It's part of the school, Chuckie. Let's just see what's down there. Maybe we finally got a pool or something.” Teachers always joked about the Willow Middle School having a pool but Charlie never believed them. Why would a middle school need a pool?

They walked to the edge of the stairs. For a moment, they saw nothing, then suddenly a tall figure appeared and started to climb the steps toward them. The woman wore a sharp, gray pants suit and her thick gray hair had been tied into a tight bun. Oversized glasses sat atop a small pointed nose. The expression on her face was stern, and not very welcoming. Charlie got the feeling he should run.

“You are a day late,” she said in a stern, monotone voice. “Ms. Clue, Mr. Cormac, please follow me.” She turned without another word and started back down the steps.

Alice shrugged at Charlie and then followed. Charlie waited for a moment, then followed his friend. He couldn't let her go with this stranger by herself, though he was pretty sure Alice would be protecting him.

“Excuse me,” Alice broke the silence. “Where are we going?”

“The testing room young lady,” the woman responded. “Pass the test, and you will attend The Auricle this year.”

“The Auricle?” Charlie asked. “What the heck is that?”

“You will see, Mr. Cormac,” she responded flatly.

They followed the woman down a long empty, gray stone hallway. It wasn't cold or dark, it was just plain. If this was The Auricle, he wanted to go back to Willow Middle School. At the end of the long, empty hallway, they came to a door. The woman stopped in front of the door and turned back to them.

“Last chance to turn back,” she said.

“Turn back from what?” Alice asked.

“Good answer, Ms. Clue,” the woman almost smiled. “Go on in and take a seat.”

She opened the door to a pretty normal looking classroom full of students. To his

surprise, Charlie recognized most of them from school. They all had pretty much the same look on their face; confusion with a hint of terror. Charlie was confused also, but he wasn't scared.

"Sit!" A deep voice growled and Charlie finally understood the terror. Sitting at the front of the room, behind a desk, was an enormous, gray skinned creature. It had small yellowish eyes and a tuft of hair on top of its pointed head. Its crooked teeth slammed together into a big smile which Charlie understood to mean "Welcome" or "I'm gonna eat you in a few moments!" Charlie followed Alice to two empty desks at the back of the large classroom. They sat down and waited nervously.

"Good morning once again," the woman in gray started. "My name is Dean Coolidge. Welcome to The Auricle. Now that we have everyone here, we can proceed." She gave Charlie the stink eye. "You are here this morning because you were identified as gifted. Your task this morning is simple. In a few moments, you will be given a test. If and when you complete this test successfully, you will move onto the next test. If you are unsuccessful, you will return from where you came as if none of this ever happened. Are there any questions?"

Nearly every kid in the room raised their hand. The creature sitting next to the Dean chuckled, or at least Charlie thought it was a chuckle. It could have been a growl. Either way the hands went down and the mouths remained shut.

"That was an impertinent question," the Dean said to herself. "Let me assure you all that your questions will be answered in time. You are here because you either know the world is a lot bigger than most people think, or you have seen something to make you think there is more out there. Today is a day of discovery, of the world and of yourself. Tractor, they are all yours."

The creature behind the desk stood, nearly hitting his head on the ceiling. He smiled as the Dean left the room, then clapped his large, gray hands together. The sound was like a tiny explosion. He paced the room as if preparing for a long winded speech, then cleared his throat. "You...may begin!"

All around the room, on every desk, appeared a test packet and pencil. Charlie had never seen anything like it. It was like magic. He grabbed the pencil and focused his attention on the paper in front of him.

On the front of the packet was his name, written in long, flowing script. Next to his name was a circle with a small letter u inside of it. The paper itself was pretty normal, nothing special, just plain white paper. He flipped to the next page. It was blank, so he flipped to the next one. It was blank too. Every single page in the packet was blank. He looked around the room. Everyone else was busy writing away. What was he missing?

"What, Mr..." Tractor approached his desk. The creature smelled like an old shoe.

"Charlie, Charlie Cormac, and yes," he flipped open his blank test, "there is nothing on my pages. Was it printed wrong or something?"

The creature grabbed his test with a hand that would make a basketball look like a ping pong ball. He flipped a few pages and then threw the test in the air. It vanished without a trace.

"Goodbye, Mr. Cormac."

"But..."

"You need to go!" Tractor growled as he pointed toward the door.

Charlie looked to Alice for help, but she just shrugged her shoulders. So he stood, grabbed his book bag, and walked out of the room. He closed the door slowly, waiting for

Tractor to tell him to come back, but it didn't happen. The door shut with a click. When he turned around, he was standing outside the library doors at Willow Middle School, no stairs to the basement in sight and certainly no giant creature named Tractor.

Grandpa Bud was about as Grandpa Bud as he could be that night. Charlie tried not to let it dampen his spirits, or take away from the fact that he needed to speak to Gran about the Peculiar, Iris. Gran knew more than she let on, and he was going to find out.

"Gran, can we talk now?" Charlie asked as they snuck into the kitchen. Grandpa Bud takes his, as he called it, "well deserved nap" every day after dinner. It was the second worst time to bother him with anything, so it became custom for Charlie and Gran to sneak into the kitchen for a small amount of normal human interaction.

"I'm not sure what you think I can tell you, Charlie," she said, glancing back toward her husband's fat belly moving up and down in his chair.

"You need to tell me, Gran," Charlie pleaded. "You know it's all real. You know and my dad knew too."

A terrified look grew in her eyes.

"He can't get mad if he's asleep, Gran."

She sat down at the kitchen table and put her head in her hands. She was terrified of Grandpa Bud. Charlie saw it more now than ever.

"Gran, please. I need some answers. I need to know I'm not crazy."

The snoring in the other room stayed steady. Grandpa Bud was out cold.

Gran steadied her breath. "You're not crazy, Charlie. Well, all of us Cormacs are crazy, but that's a different conversation." Gran grinned ever so slightly. It was a real grin, a spark of something hidden deep inside his grandmother. Something that hadn't come out in a long time. "Did you do it? Did you take the test?"

Charlie grinned. "Yeah! I mean yes I did."

"And?"

"Well, I don't know. It was strange."

Gran grabbed Charlie's hands. Her hands were cold and trembling. "Did you pass? Did you get in? I know you will."

"But what does it mean?" Charlie asked. "First you give me something from my dad, which I can't find, and then I take this test given to me by a creature named Tractor. What the heck is going on?"

"Oh Tractor," Gran smiled even bigger. "He's a real gem, smells like an old shoe but is wonderful."

He had never seen his Gran like this.

"So what do I do?" Charlie asked.

"Enjoy it," Gran smiled. "Enjoy every part of it."

"But what do I do about Iris?"

"Iris Pettlesmith is..." Gran stopped suddenly.

The snoring from the other room had ceased and Grandpa Bud stood in the doorway of the kitchen. His face was a dark shade of purple and Charlie could have sworn he saw steam

pouring out of the man's ears. He pounded his large fist on the table, shaking the whole room like a small earthquake.

"What did I tell you about this nonsense?" He barreled.

"Grandpa Bud..." Charlie started.

"Shut up, boy!" He screamed. "If I want to hear your wretched voice, I will ask for it. Now explain yourself, woman!"

"I asked her about something at school?" Charlie stood in between his Gran and Grandpa. "I asked."

"Don't test me, boy!" Bud grabbed Charlie by the arm and pushed him toward the stairs. "Get out of my face."

"Leave him be, Bud," Gran stood. "Just leave him be." She was so calm, like she tried to will her demeanor into the man.

Then Grandpa Bud did something Charlie had prepared himself for but never really expected to see. He slapped his Gran across the face with the back of his hand. She stumbled backward but did not fall. Charlie started at Bud, but Gran put up her hand.

"No!" She gasped. "It's okay. It was my fault. He is right to be angry."

"Gran." Charlie's heart pounded in his chest like a bass drum. He could feel rage boiling up inside him like nothing he had ever felt before.

"I won't tell you again, woman," Bud snarled. "I don't want to hear anymore about it... dragons, or whatever nonsense you two come up with in this house again! Do I make myself clear?"

Gran fixed her apron and looked at Charlie. She was silently pleading for him to agree with the man, to not push it any further. Even though he wanted to smash the man through the wall. He breathed deeply, trying to subdue the fire building in his gut.

"Yes, sir," he managed to spit out.

Charlie gave his Gran a reassuring look.

"It's time you take out the trash, boy."

Charlie grabbed the garbage from the basket and made his way outside. He glanced back at Gran and she nodded reassuringly.

The night was cool for this time of year, and slowly the fire inside him began to fade. He sat on the steps and breathed deeply. It was his fault. He should have never put Gran in that position. As long as they lived with Grandpa Bud, he had to protect her and tonight he failed. How could he have been so stupid.

"Mr. Cormac?" said a strange voice.

A small creature with red hair stood beside the front steps. It looked like Iris, except it had large, buck teeth and extremely large horns. He wore a blue uniform that was two sizes too big. On the left chest were yellow letters that read SPTF.

"Mr. Cormac?" He asked again.

"Yes."

"Well why didn't you answer me the first time? I said your name and you just stared at me like an ogre deciding if he can read. Which I can tell you, they can't." The little creature flipped open a small notebook. "So are you Charlie Cormac or aren't you?" He wiped his small snotty nose with a long uniform sleeve, a little snot still glistening on his red fur.

"Yes. I am." Charlie said.

"I got a message for you from the Dean." He licked his finger and leafed through his notebook. "The Dean says 'make sure you buy some sticky pops for Susie Squinters before going home today.'" He looked up at Charlie in satisfaction.

"What?"

He looked down at his notebook again. "I'll be a dwarf's butt hair. Forget that! The Dean says; 'Congratulations on passing your First Test. Come down the stairs tomorrow at 8 a.m. sharp.' Peace out!" He looked up. "The peace out part was me. The creature turned and began to walk away.

"Are you a Peculiar?" Charlie asked.

The creature shut his notebook and clicked his pen closed. "Smart one you are. Was it the horns that gave it away? Tomorrow...8 am...bottom of the stairs. Got it?"

"But..."

"Ugh, just say yes."

"Yes," Charlie said.

Then the Peculiar vanished on the spot.