

ONE

A staircase led to nowhere. It stood in the middle of a rough, broken plain.

A stocky boy sat on the stairs, sagging low, his elbows on his knees. Dim blue light shone from jagged cracks in the black sky. It faintly lit ruins.

Brian Thatz raised his head to look out across the murky horizon. Arches below him supported nothing. Columns stood with no roof. Cellars sat naked beneath the low, dark sky. And beyond all this, there was only a flat sea of ooze.

Brian uncurled, reached out to lift the singed leg of a broken chair, and stirred the ashes of his fire. The ashes glowed faintly. He slid across the step he sat on to get closer to the warmth.

At the top of the ceremonial staircase, a few steps up, stood a black slab, a gateway to another world.

Brian was cold — chilled to the bone — and tired. He had not eaten for a day. At least he thought it was a day.

Time was difficult, for there was no sun, no night, no day — just cracks in the sky and a reflecting glimmer in far marshes of stew.

The ruins covered a square mile or so. They were all built of rough-hewn brown stone. Hardly anything stood. Chimneys. A few walls. The staircase was the tallest thing in the city. It was a broad staircase, and had a twist to it. In an earlier age, all the refugees of lost Norumbega had fled down these wide steps, coming to this world to make a new home.

Now a dull silence lay over the fallen metropolis. Occasionally, the wind stirred, shuffling over the desolate marshes.

Brian could hear the bickering of his friends as they returned to the camp.

“This is dumb.”

“*You’re* dumb.”

“I am not dumb.”

“I didn’t mean you were actually dumb. I just mean it’s dumb to say that things are dumb.”

“You’re not even — don’t even argue with me! You’re not even real!”

“So I’m fake, and you’re dumb. We’re even.”

“You’re dumb *and* fake. You’re programmed to be dumb.”

Brian was exhausted, and wished they’d stop fighting. They had all spent the last twelve hours or so searching the ruins for life or clues. Before that, they’d spent an awful day crawling around under a mountain, dodging

silver tentacles, defending a kitchen against alien invasion, and vanquishing an undead real estate developer.

Brian's friends came trudging up the steps to nowhere. One was a blond boy with a burned hand wrapped in a piece of cloth. The other was a troll in Renaissance armor.

"We didn't find anything," said Kalgrash, the troll.

"We found *something*," said Gregory, the boy. "A bureau. We found a smashed-up bureau."

Kalgrash held out a wooden drawer. "For firewood." He tossed it down on the step. It cracked and slid down a few stairs.

Brian stood up and looked out over the sinkholes and slime. "What are we going to do? Where have they all gone?"

The three had risked everything to come in search of the Norumbegans, the elfin race that had raised this city in this weird plain. Back in the pleasant valleys of Vermont, the tricky, wicked Thusser had been arranging an alien settlement, stealing into dreams and corrupting time. The Thusser's invasion had been slowed, Brian hoped, by the destruction of their agent on Earth — but it had not been stopped. Even as Brian stood helplessly on this staircase to nowhere, the Thusser might be marching through a gateway onto the green lawns of Brian and Gregory's world.

Brian whispered, "What happened to this place?"

"No bodies," said Kalgrash, squinting. He clanked over to the side of the staircase and looked down at the cellars. "No sign of a battle or fire."

“The bureau was almost okay,” said Gregory. “Just missing one leg. It was, you know, the kind of bureau that has legs.”

“Maybe,” said Kalgrash softly, “maybe the city was never destroyed.”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked.

“I don’t think the city was ever finished in the first place.”

Brian and Gregory thought about this. The wind picked up. It blew Brian’s black hair into his eyes, and he raised his hand to push the mess of it back.

Kalgrash said, “Maybe it’s not ruined. Maybe it’s unbuilt. Like the Norumbegans abandoned it. They got here, started to build — *tinka-tonka, tinka-tonka, tinka-tonka* — and then they moved on. Nothing looks like it was ever finished. I mean, the stonework. In the City of Gargoyles, they did all this fancy carving. Here, nothing’s carved. It’s like they were just starting. And I think some of these aren’t even cellars — they’re quarries. Where they were cutting out the rock. Yup.” He nodded and looked around at the pits and columns. “Yup, yup, yup. That’s what I think.”

Gregory sat down wearily by the fire. He rubbed his roughly bandaged hand.

“I think you’re right,” said Brian. “Yeah.”

Kalgrash mused anxiously, “I wonder what made them keep going . . . or . . . you know . . . wiped them out.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Gregory. “The thing is, we’re trapped, right?”

“Yeah,” said Brian. “Prudence and Snig can get us through the portal on their side, but we need someone to open it from this end, too. I don’t know how.”

“Right. Bingo,” said Gregory. “So it doesn’t really matter whether the Norumbegans were wiped out or they left. Because either way, we’re stuck here in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat and nothing in any direction except an ocean of goo.” He flapped his hand at the glistening swamp.

“Better goo than gunk,” said Kalgrash.

“What?” Gregory said, exasperated.

“Gunk’s grimier than goo. Goo’s . . . gookier, but not grimy.” Kalgrash looked to Brian for support. “Am I wrong?”

Brian didn’t answer. He was looking up at the obsidian portal, which just twelve hours before they had walked through like it was a pool, but which now, if they tried to pass back through, would be hard as marble.

Gregory glared at them both. He picked up the broken drawer and snapped it across his knee. He fed the pieces into the failing fire.

The black smoke went up, curled like the staircase, rising high above the shattered landscape and disappearing into the gloom.