

By Lorelai Gerard, Age 13, Seventh Grade

It's said that not all who wander are lost, and that's mostly true. Apollo wasn't lost. He knew where he was going. He just didn't know exactly how to get there. He glanced at the picture he was holding again, of the vision he saw constantly. In his sleep, when he closed his eyes, or just out of the blue. At first the image of the building surrounded by sandy clouds had just seemed like something made by his imagination, a product of his fascination with geology and architecture. After seeing it on a constant basis and hearing voices telling him to go, however, he decided it was more of some sort of sign. So he left his house. He hadn't even told anybody. Apollo lived in an old Victorian style house far away from the rest of society, with a beautiful view of the land around. He loved it there, but he felt he needed to go, so he did.

Apollo had been walking for about three days now. He'd brought a backpack filled with maps and blank paper to illustrate his own map, along with essentials like a sleeping bag and sustenance. Here he was, staring at the drawing he'd made of the palace looking building, wondering if he'd made a mistake. Maybe they weren't visions. Maybe the image was just a creation of his mind that he was taking too seriously. The building didn't seem like something that would still be around, and if it was it most likely would have been made into a museum or attraction of sorts. His mind swirled with a storm of reasons why this may not be a good idea, and yet he kept walking. Something inside of him, even though it was almost drowned out by the sea of pessimism, told him that he was doing the right thing. Somehow that was enough for him to want to continue.

Apollo made his way through the thick greenery in front of him, which brushed against his legs and tugged at his shoestrings. It was an overgrown area, one that clearly wasn't meant to be walked through, which was perhaps why he'd decided to come through it. Sunlight filtered in through small areas through the heavy canopy of the tree's leaves. There were smaller trees here and there, blocked from the sunlight they required by the taller cedars and oaks. It almost felt jungle-like. He progressed through the heavily wooded area, sometimes struggling to find places to step on the ground littered with branches and foliage.

Eventually, the trees began to thin out. It was almost dark by then, and the falling sun cast a golden light across the sight waiting for him on the other side. The building he'd seen a thousand times was resting there in wait for him. He held up his sketch to make sure. The same immense turrets, towering off-white walls, half oval windows, and long staircase. Apollo's breath caught in his throat, stunned by the beauty of the architectural wonder. He was frozen in place for a moment, shaken by the fact that he had been right. Then, after taking it in for a full minute, he started to run towards it. It was decently far away, but he was running as quickly as he could and he was getting steadily closer to his destiny.

Apollo stopped at the bottom of the steps to catch his breath, then looked up. There had to be at least a few hundred stairs. Part of him wished there had been some sort of elevator or escalator, but he supposed that getting to where you're meant to be was never supposed to be easy, so why

should it be now? He started up the first step, telling himself with each one that he only had to go up a few more.

Eventually, as the sun faded below the horizon, so did Apollo's journey to the place he'd been seeing for years. He stared up at the looming wooden door, about ten times larger than him. He hesitated. Apollo had no idea what he was supposed to do now. He didn't know if he was supposed to find a way to open the door or if someone would do that for him, or what. Finally, he decided on the only thing he could think of. He raised his fist to the door and knocked.

There was a creaking noise, and the door started going down into the palace. Which was incredibly convenient for Apollo, because if it had gone the other way he probably would've been crushed, and that would not have been a good time. He waited, watching as the door slowly revealed the inside of the palace. It was just as stunning as the outside. There were sapphire colored banners on the walls lined in silver, torches in each corner, and, as the door hit the floor, he caught sight of a blue carpet leading down the middle of the room to a throne made out of quartz. Someone was sitting in it, and when Apollo stepped into the room, they looked up. Apollo started walking closer as the person stood and began to do the same. As they grew nearer, Apollo was able to tell more about the person. She was a girl, but not what seemed like a human girl. At least that's what he concluded from the fact that she was glowing. Her eyes were big and blue, and everything else about her was pure white and shimmering. She smiled. "Hello." She said, her voice light and kind.

"Um, hi." Apollo wasn't sure exactly how to feel about this situation. He stopped walking when they were about a yard away from each other, still processing everything happening, from the gorgeous room to the glowing girl in a flowing white dress.

"I assume you're fairly confused. That's normal. I doubt that you're used to seeing things like this in your everyday life. Or maybe you are. I don't really know what life is like for humans. I'm Clara." She reached out a hand.

Apollo hesitated, but then took a step closer and shook her hand. "Apollo." He tried to think of a way to say what he wanted to that wouldn't be impolite. "Um, not to be rude or anything, but what are you, exactly?"

Clara laughed, folding her hands in front of her. "I'm a star."

"A... star?"

"Yes. I know it must sound quite odd, but I come from the sky. I was sent here to meet the chosen one, which I'm assuming is you. Otherwise I have no idea how you could have gotten here."

Apollo looked around. "I've seen this place before. In dreams or in visions. I didn't know why so I decided to try and look for it."

“That was the right decision.” Her smile faltered a little. “You see, Apollo, the land I came from is in danger. All the stars are in danger of being snuffed out. Including the one your planet relies on most, the sun. You need to come back with me and help stop the force trying to do this.”

“I have to do what? Listen, I’m not very good at fighting. I’m much better at facts than I am at things like that.” He felt sort of embarrassed by his lack of strength.

The light radiating from Clara dimmed some. “So... you won’t help?” She looked incredibly distressed.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I couldn’t do much of anything to help you. I’m very sorry.” He looked down at the ground, ashamed.

There was a moment of silence, but then Clara smiled sadly. “That’s alright. Thank you for coming.”

“I’m very sorry.” Apollo whispered. He turned and started walking out of the palace.

Before he left, though, he looked back. Clara was sitting back in the throne, looking sorrowfully up at the stars. Apollo directed his gaze up slightly and watched as one of them completely disappeared. Then another, and another. Clara’s light, which had once been bright enough to fill the room and pour out onto the staircase, was weakening itself. Apollo felt himself turn and run over to her before he could stop himself. “I’ll help you!” He declared confidently. Clara looked at him hopefully, her light brightening.

“You will?”

“Yes. It’d be selfish of me not to.”

Clara’s face lit up. “Then we need to go. Give me your hands.” She placed her palms in front of her, turned toward the ceiling. Apollo placed his hands on top of hers gingerly. Clara closed her brilliantly colored eyes, and linked their fingers. Apollo didn’t know what was happening for a moment, until she spoke again, opening one of her eyes. “You may want to close your eyes. I don’t think it ends well if you don’t.” She closed it again.

“Oh. Alright.” Apollo closed his eyes and waited. There was a sensation of the ground falling out from under him, which scared him at first but went away after a moment. Then it felt as though he was spinning, the speed at which he was doing so increasing by the second. He felt all stability leave him, and squeezed Clara’s hands for support. After what felt like an eternity, the feeling of solid ground returned and the world stopped spinning. He heard a laugh, and opened his eyes cautiously.

“You get used to it after a few more times.” Clara smiled at him, releasing his hands.

“Where are we?” Apollo asked, standing up straight and pretending he hadn’t been acting like a coward a moment before.

“We’re in my homeland. The kingdom of the stars.” Clara moved so that she was standing beside him rather than in front of him. Apollo looked around in awe. A moment ago he would’ve said the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen was the palace, but looking around he knew it was this. The land shone with a sort of brilliance he was unable to describe, everything colored a mix of beautiful silvers and whites and pale blues. There were trees, but not like the ones on Earth in their color. It was like a perfect world.

“How is this place in danger? It’s so beautiful.” Apollo couldn’t move his eyes from the marvelous sight.

“Come with me.” Clara led him to the top of a hill that rested in front of them. Apollo noticed how when his feet hit the ground, it felt like walking on stardust. He didn’t even know how he knew what that felt like. He reached the top of the hill, and first looked at Clara’s downtrodden expression. He moved his eyes to what the hill was overlooking, and his breath caught in his throat. There were others like Clara, stars, struggling to fight against black monsters that were trying to draw them in.

“What is it?” Apollo asked in disbelief, shaken that something would feel the need to snuff out something as beautiful as this.

“Those,” Clara began, “Are what we call Methani. They come from black holes. They were never a problem until five years ago, when they found a wormhole to the kingdom and began attacking. They hate light and want to get rid of all of it. Starting with us.”

Apollo looked at her in astonishment. “You’ve been waiting for me to come for five years?”

“Yes.” Clara gave a subtle nod. “I’m glad you came when you did. I was beginning to get quite lonely.”

“Why you? I-I don’t mean to be rude. You just look fairly young to have such an important job.”

“I’m twenty, in human years. I believe you are too, or so the prophecy states. I’m the chosen one from my kind. I was quite young when I was told my duty, yes, but it was worth it if you’ll be able to help my people.” She smiled.

“Oh. I didn’t know stars had ages. I thought you were all thousands of years old.”

“It may seem like that, but we only live for an average of one hundred years. There’s just always another in the family to take the star’s place in the sky when their life ends. When you see what you think is a star dying, it’s actually the last star of a bloodline dying.”

“Wow.” Apollo looked away from Clara and to the battlefield. “So how do I help?”

“You have to close the blackhole. You said you weren’t that good at fighting, but this shouldn’t really require much fighting.”

“Oh, alright sounds easy-.” Apollo processed the words and stopped talking. “I have to close a blackhole?! Is that even possible?”

“Yes, it is. The Elders have a sword passed down through the ages that will do just that. We have to retrieve it from them first, and then I’ll show you what you have to do. We need to hurry.”

Apollo struggled to find words, but then got over himself. “Okay. Where do we need to go?”

Clara smiled. “I’m glad you’ve stuck with this. Come on, I’ll take you. Follow closely.” She started running down the other side of the hill, her feet hitting the ground lightly. Apollo followed quickly after her, surprised by how fast she could move. He glanced occasionally up at the battle raging just a few hundred feet to their left. It was scary, even though there was no gore or real violence. Well, there was sort of violence. The stars were using swords that shone the same way as them, trying to plunge them into the creatures of darkness that were attempting to stab them with their own blades. Apollo thanked the heavens that they hadn’t been noticed, because he had no idea what would happen if one of those weapons was used on him. He was so focused on the scene that he didn’t notice Clara had stopped, and nearly ran into her.

Clara moved to open the door of the building in front of them. It wasn’t overly extravagant, but it had a lot of subtle beauty to it. It was a one level, pearly white building with a pillar on each edge and on either side of the door. Clara opened it, revealing a room with seven chairs, all occupied by an older looking star, a curved table in front of them. They all gave Clara and Apollo their attention in a cool manner. A woman who had been standing against the wall saw the pair of them and let out a sigh of relief, smiling. “Clara. You made it back safely.”

“Yes, Mother. This is Apollo, Earth’s chosen one.” Clara had the same calm and collected manner as the elder, but Apollo was incredibly nervous, a tidal wave of reasons to be so swirling through his head. Clara put a hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, seeming to sense his nerves. He felt slight reassurance at the touch, knowing that at least one of them had some idea of what was going on here.

“H-Hello.” He raised a hand in what was supposed to be a wave, then dropped it back to his side awkwardly. The Elders, as Clara had called them earlier, each had their own reaction to this, most of them entertained by his anxiousness.

“So I take it you two are here for the sword,” The elder in the middle said, folding her hands on the table.

“We are.” Clara removed her hand from Apollo’s shoulder. Apollo wasn’t sure exactly where to look, his gaze moving from her to the Elders to the architectural beauty of the building.

“Apollo. As the head elder, I feel the need to ask you something.” The woman in the center placed her palms on the table and then rose, looking at him seriously.

“Of course, ma’am.” Apollo glanced at Clara to see if she knew what was happening, but she was staring stoically at the Elder. He moved his attention back to her.

“Clara trained her entire life to do her duty. You may be chosen by the prophecy, but I fear we don’t know if you are fully prepared to accomplish your own job. Are you absolutely certain that you are ready to risk your life in order to save the kingdom of the stars?” She looked at him with a gaze that was calmly intimidating.

“Yes, I am.” Apollo surprised himself by answering. He had expected to be hesitant with such a drastic matter, and yet he wasn’t. He was sure of his decision. Most of his life, Apollo had wanted a purpose. He was convinced that this was it.

“Well then.” The woman took her seat again. “This is for you.” She reached under the table and pulled out a case, then opened it. He couldn’t see what was inside of it until it was closed again. Beautiful wonders just kept hitting Apollo’s eyes, and this was no different. The blade was intricately designed, the handle made of the same glowing material as the other swords he had seen outside, but it had details in blues and silvers. The blade, however, shone with a brilliance he had never seen before, so much that his eyes had a hard time being able to take it in. It was the color of the aurora borealis, waving across the sword in the same way. She passed it to the woman who had greeted Clara when they came in, who came over to the two of them, holding it with all the delicacy a person possibly could.

“It will be your job to wield this blade and use its power to close the black hole. However, it will make you a significantly larger target. You will be able to defend yourself, but you’ll also have to defend Clara. Can you promise me that you will protect my daughter?” She held out the blade to him.

Apollo took the sword in his hands carefully, adjusting swiftly to the weight. “With everything I have.”

The woman smiled. “Then go and fulfill your destiny.”

Apollo nodded and turned to Clara. She looked significantly more ready for the mission, a determined smile on her face. She glanced at him. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s.” Clara was out the door before he had time to thank the Elders, so he simply smiled gratefully at them before following her out the door. She was sprinting, and Apollo had to do the same in order to catch her.

“You know, part of the whole protecting you thing means that I have to stay with you.” He puffed.

“We have to hurry if we’re going to save as many of my people as possible.” Apollo’s feet pounded against the ground to the rhythm of his heart rate as they entered the battleground. Almost as if triggering a cutscene in a video game, one of the Methani darted over to Apollo and Clara. Apollo readied himself, taking a deep breath, and swung the sword. The blade cut clear through the beast, leaving a gash through him. It let out a horrible shrieking noise as it faded out of existence, making Apollo wince.

“What a lovely noise.” He remarked through gritted teeth.

“Something like that.” Clara replied, dodging the particles of stardust that flew down, followed by a star’s sword. “We need to hurry.” Her voice was pained. Apollo couldn’t imagine how horrible it must be for her to have the fate of her people in her hands, but he supposed he had that same burden to carry. If it could be classified as a burden. He picked up his pace so that his feet were moving faster than his mind could register. Clara noticed the change and increased her speed as much as she could as well.

After running through the field of suffering for a number of minutes and battling a decent few Methani, Clara pointed forward, her hand shaking with a mix of her tiring and how shaken she was from the dying stars. “Th-There! We need to get to the edge.”

Apollo followed her finger to its intended destination. The land just seemed to end. “What?! We can’t jump off into oblivion!”

“Just trust me!”

Apollo struggled with the thought, but kept running anyhow. He’d made it this far, and he didn’t plan on stopping now. He stabbed the shimmering blade into a Methani that had tried to make a barrier between them and the edge, not taking the time to stop and listen to the scream. They reached the edge and Clara thrust out her arm. “Take my hand!” Apollo did so without the slightest hesitation, gripping the hilt of the sword tightly. Clara took a deep breath and jumped into the sky, higher than he could’ve imagined possible, taking him with her. She continued hopping on the air, counting on Apollo to kill the monsters before they could get to them as she neared the area they seemed to be coming from. “We’re about to enter the wormhole! I’ve never been through one before, but I assume it’s something like transporting between worlds. Hold on tight though, to me and the sword. I don’t know what’ll happen.” She took one last leap, and the world around him seemed to evaporate. He felt a million sensations that he couldn’t put into words for a split second, and then he

emerged on the other side, still tightly clutching the handle of the sword as well as Clara's hand. He took in his surroundings quickly. It seemed like just floating through space, though somehow he was able to breathe. It was dark, beautiful, and mysterious, but more importantly, there was a dark abyss in front of him spewing out Methani. Clara squeezed his hand tighter, her hair and dress fluttering in the pull of the blackhole as she struggled to keep them in the sky. Apollo kept his focus on slicing open the Methani that were coming from the blackhole.

"What do I have to do?!" He yelled over the sounds of shrieking and wind.

"You need to jump toward the blackhole and plunge the blade into it! As insane as that must sound, it's the only way! I'll be here to fly you out once you do!" She moved her hand back, and he moved with it. "I'm going to throw you in! Get ready! Oh, and Apollo!" He looked at her through squinted eyes. "Be safe!" He nodded at the same time that she flung him into the pull of the void in front of him. Apollo struggled to fight back the seemingly endless amounts of Methani while positioning himself in a way that he would be able to stab the blackhole. He finally focused himself enough to do it properly though, and got ready to make the killing blow. Then he heard a yelp behind him. He glanced back for only a moment, but it was enough for him to see Clara kick away a Methani, her left hand grasping her shoulder. Her light was flickering between different points of brightness. Adrenaline roared through Apollo's veins, his heartbeat the only thing he was capable of hearing at the moment. He stabbed a final Methani before the sword plunged into the dark vacuum ahead of him. He slid down it as if it were a wall, leaving a gouge through it lengthwise. When he removed the sword, he heard a roaring sound begin. Something in him knew that it was about to explode. He looked back at Clara, but her light was still flickering and she seemed to be having trouble keeping herself afloat, so it appeared it was his job to get the two of them out there before it blew. But he couldn't fly, and there was no other way to do it. Apollo squeezed the hilt of the sword until his knuckles turned white, praying for some way out of this.

Apparently the sword could tell what he needed, because a bright light began shining around him, and he stopped falling. Apollo looked at the object that he was holding, awestruck when he realized that its glow had become even brighter than it already had been. He sucked in a breath and did what he knew he needed to do.

Apollo, remembering Clara's technique, jumped using the air as a platform, and started zooming through the air past the dissolving Methani. He neared the wormhole and Clara, who was right next to it now, starting to go limp. Apollo reached out and grabbed her, pulling her away from another Methani, and they flew through the wormhole just as he heard an explosion ring out behind him.

Apollo wasn't sure if he lost consciousness or not immediately after the explosion. But he'd appeared on the ground just shy of where the battlefield, still clutching Clara and the sword without recollection of how he had gotten there. There was a moment of pure shock, shortly followed by the realization that Clara may be dying. He turned all his attention to her, lying her carefully on the



ground. Her eyes were closed now, and she wasn't moving other than slight movements as she breathed. "Clara," Apollo muttered at first, then raised his voice. "Clara! Can you hear me?"

When she didn't reply, Apollo felt guilt wash over him. It was his fault for leaving her alone without means of defense. She was dying, and it was his fault. He dropped the sword on the starry ground next to him, feeling defeated.

"Get up, young man." Apollo recognized the voice from the building of Elders. He looked up, meeting gazes with the head Elder. She looked surprisingly unshaken by the fact that Clara was losing her light. He didn't move. "I asked you to get up." Apollo didn't see a point, but he stood up. The Elder nodded at him, then knelt down next to Clara. "Oh, Clara. What did you do to get a cut like this?" Her expression lightened as she pulled out a pouch from her robes. "You always were a bit reckless, but I suppose it only adds to your charm. You're very lucky it's not worse." She loosened the drawstrings of the pouch and poured a small amount of the contents into her hand. A golden powder. With the powder in her hand, she pressed her palm against the cut against Clara's shoulder for a moment. Apollo looked down at the action, wondering how this would possibly help. But when she pulled away, the black that had been in the cut was gone. The injury was still there, but it looked much less dangerous. The Elder stood. "That should fix her up." As if on cue, Clara's light began to grow back to its normal brilliance.

"What did you..?" Apollo was at a loss for words and unable to finish his sentence.

"Sun powder. It's fairly rare, but we're able to use it on injuries caused by the Methani in the rare case that a star comes back with one and is still alive." She looked over at Apollo. "You did a good job keeping her safe. If you hadn't, there would be no one here for me to use the sun powder on."

"Thank you." Apollo, still starstruck, moved his eyes back to Clara, who was now stirring. She frowned and sat up slowly before opening her eyes.

"Did... Did we do it?" She asked, looking up at Apollo hopefully.

"Yeah. We did." Apollo replied, smiling.

"Oh. Yay." Clara grinned. "Hey, what happened? I don't remember anything after I threw you towards the blackhole."

Apollo reached out a hand to help her up, which she took and used to stand again. "I'll explain it to you if you tell me more about stars and your culture."

"Deal." Clara and him started walking away from the battlefield.

The head Elder watched them go, a slight smile on her face. “They did greatly. The prophecy picked well.” She looked up at the endless beauty of space, which acted as a sky to their kingdom.. “You would be very proud of the things your daughter has accomplished, Astraios.” She let out a small laugh, despite herself. “And I believe you’d even be impressed with the guts of that boy, Apollo. I didn’t expect so much from a shy boy like him. He’s been wandering around trying to find a purpose for most of his life. That’s why you thought it was him, wasn’t it? I guess it really is true that not all who wander are lost.”