

**THE ADVENTURES OF
CLEMENTINE
LEMONS
& THE LOST STONES OF DOHI**

THE EARTH STONE

IRELAND VON MUELLER

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Cover Art by Andrew Duggan. To view his artwork, visit andrewmaps.com.

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To the dreamers and adventurers.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Clementine Lemons sat alone at the Pandora Avenue bus stop, completely and utterly lost in the pages of the mystery novel wedged against her knees. Now and then, she'd run her fingers through her long dark hair or casually fidget with the tassels on the scarf draped loosely around her neck. But beyond that, she was oblivious to the world, and the world was oblivious to her.

Clementine bit her lower lip as two masked men appeared out of a shadowy alley and chased Adriana James—her heroine—through the dark streets of Bangkok. Clem could hear the soft patter of Adriana's feet as her pace quickened; she could feel the warmth of the air as Adriana ran over the bridge toward the safety of the crowded night market. Suddenly, two more masked men appeared before her, blocking her way. Adriana turned to run back, but the two men behind her were already on the bridge, the silver of their gun barrels gleaming in the streetlight. Adriana was trapped. Clutching the backpack containing the ancient jade talisman, she leaped off the bridge and into the murky waters below.

Clem's heart raced. *How was Adriana going to get out of this mess?*

Anxiously flipping the page, Clementine looked up in time to catch a glimpse of a Starbucks advertisement rolling by. *The bus!*

The last passenger was already climbing the stairs. Snapping her book closed, Clem jumped off the bench, grabbed her bag and half-empty cup of tea, and leaped toward

the bus.

The doors snapped shut on her nose.

“Wait...” Clem started to protest. As she spoke, the paper cup and book slipped from her hand—landing with a splat at her feet.

The bus driver didn’t give the curb a second glance as he jostled back into the early-evening traffic. Sighing, Clementine bent and rescued her now-wet book from the sidewalk. As she stood, the back window of the bus slid open.

“Hey, Lemons, if you ever find your way home, tell Ferg that Coach canceled tomorrow’s practice,” a cute blond hollered with a laugh.

The window shut, and the bus lumbered down the street, leaving Clementine standing alone in a pool of cold tea.

“Ugh. Might as well change schools now,” Clem groaned.

Cheeks burning with embarrassment, she plopped back on the bench of the empty bus stop. With Ferg for a brother, Clem may as well have been invisible. The few times people did notice her, it was only because she’d done something idiotic, like now or like the time she’d tripped in gym class, slid across the floor, and bowled down half the basketball team. Or when the cute new science teacher asked her to name an element from the periodic table, and she thought he’d asked for her name, so she blurted out, “Lementine Clemons.” If she were lucky, the school would burn to the ground before morning. *Oh, if only.*

Pulling out her phone, Clementine looked at the clock. Twenty-six minutes until the next bus.

Thursdays were the worst. When they were little, her grandma Eloise watched her and Ferg after school. Things were fun then. But Clem’s grandma had passed away when she was ten. Ferg, who was a year older than her, had

discovered sports and become a superstar at everything. The next thing Clem knew, he was busy all the time—swim meets, rowing club, basketball, skiing. Ferg was determined to get to the Olympics. The more he achieved, the more Clem’s parents insisted she “find her own thing” too. But it turned out, finding your “own thing” was easier said than done.

They hadn’t even asked before enrolling her in piano lessons on her twelfth birthday. She’d been taking lessons for over a year and had hated every minute of it.

“You need a productive hobby, Clementine,” her mother sighed. “Since sports aren’t ‘your thing,’ and art isn’t ‘your thing,’ you can try music. You can’t sit around the house reading all the time. It’s not healthy.”

But music wasn’t “her thing” either. Clem hated playing the piano. Her fingers were too short, and her brain worked too slowly to find the right keys. Her teacher, Mrs. Lee, was strict and boring and rarely spoke unless it was to complain about how poorly Clementine played and how much more she needed to practice. There was only one reason she kept going to lessons. Mrs. Lee’s piano school was at the top of a long flight of stairs hidden by a narrow red door at 23 ½ Fan Tan Alley. Anyone who read books knew the best mysteries started at unusual locations. As far as Clementine was concerned, it didn’t get any more unusual than 23 ½ Fan Tan Alley. If she kept her eye on the alley long enough, something exciting was bound to happen...eventually.

Wiping the tea from the cover of her book, she dove back in.

“We are not alone! Not alone. *No, no, no!* You aren’t even the only one of you! I met myself once. Weird, so weird it was. It wasn’t really me, I guess. Sure looked like me, though...” The words met Clementine’s ears as unexpectedly as thunder

on a cloudless day, echoing in her head and once again ripping her attention from her book.

Working his way toward her, a man strained to push an overstuffed shopping cart up the sidewalk. Clementine had seen him around before. She'd heard people at the bus stop refer to him as "the Professor." With his dingy white lab coat and finger-in-a-light-socket gray hair, he vaguely resembled Albert Einstein. As he shuffled closer, he continued his loud, nonsensical rant about the multiverse and interdimensional travel.

"Have you ever seen a lunar wolf? Magnificent beasts!" He grabbed the arm of the only other person on the street. "Ten to the power of ten, to the power of one hundred and twenty-two distinct possible particle configurations. Infinite repetition over infinite parallel universes. Mind-blowing." The Professor spoke with the conviction of a priest at Sunday mass and the hurried fervor of an auctioneer bent on getting the highest price for an item no one wanted to buy. His sermon was addressed to everyone, yet no one in particular.

Clementine stared at the Professor a moment. She wished she believed in something with such passion she felt the need to shout it from the rooftops. But the reality of life had long replaced the magic and whimsy that had once fueled her soul. What she wouldn't give to believe in unicorns and fairies again...or even lunar wolves, *whatever they were*.

Clem watched a shimmery piece of purple tinsel dislodge itself from the mile-high mosaic of randomness bulging out of the Professor's cart. It slunk down the metal grates and flirted dangerously with a wobbly wheel before a single gust of spring wind sent it sailing freely through the street. The tinsel caught briefly on a timeworn sign before continuing its journey into the unknown. Clementine, however, did not see

it disappear. Her attention hadn't left the sign the tinsel had caught on.

It was as weathered as the faded exterior of the brick building upon which it hung. THE COMPENDIUM OF CURIOSITIES, once painted in gold on a navy backdrop, had long since faded to melted butter on drab gray. Peeling paint hung from the front door like strips of bark on a dying tree. Half of the black wrought iron numbers in the address—101016 Pandora Avenue—were missing, their ghostly shadows forever etched into the grime. The glass in the window was too dirty to see through, save for the corner nearest the door, where someone had swirled the dirt just enough to make the Open sign visible. The storefront sagged as if the building were carrying the weight of the city upon its worn-out shoulders.

Clementine wondered how she'd sat across the street from this store every Thursday for over a year and never noticed it until now.

Clem loved antiques. Grandma Eloise often took Ferg and her "treasure hunting." They'd sift through the junk in decrepit barns and at flea markets and auctions all over Vancouver Island. Occasionally they'd even go dumpster diving, though they were careful not to mention the dumpsters to their mom. Together, they'd found all sorts of neat things. Clem's favorite earrings had come out of a trash bin behind a thrift store. Even though her ears weren't pierced then, her grandma had told her, "You found them. You keep them!" Clem loved every second of it. She imagined it was as close as she'd ever get to being Adriana James.

Dog-earing the page of her book, Clementine looked at her phone. There was still a good twenty minutes until the next bus. Besides, if she ducked into the store now, she could avoid

the Professor altogether. People said he was harmless, but she was still scared of him. Tossing her book in her bag, Clem made her way across the street.

The shop was much more cavernous inside than its storefront let on. The jingle of the bells hanging above the door frame fell flat as the heavy door shut with resolute certainty. The front counter—nearly invisible under a mountain of mysterious parcels, unopened wooden crates, and a pile of broken clocks—was void of human life. The only movement came from the rusty fan oscillating in the corner. Its sole purpose seemed to be recirculating dust.

“Hello?” Clementine called out, but the word was quickly lost in the jumble of antiques spread out before her. She took the lack of response as an open invitation to explore at her leisure.

Filtered through the dusty air, the shafts of light coming through the windows did little to illuminate the darkness. Clementine wandered away from the front door—the only obvious portal to the outside world—and through the maze-like passages between the tall stacks of furniture and knickknacks. The place felt like an abandoned carnival, but to Clem, this only added to the air of mystery. Occasionally she paused to listen for voices or any sign of life other than her own. The shop was so still she was sure if she listened hard enough, she’d be able to hear the furniture talk. Clem smiled at this thought.

She and Ferg used to make up all sorts of wild stories while their grandma was bargain-hunting. Clem’s favorite was a story they’d invented about a grandfather clock that was actually a time machine. You could go back in time as far as you wanted. The only catch was the clock decided where you landed. One time, she’d sent Fergus back to 1852, and the

clock had dumped him in the middle of the ocean. He swam to a pirate ship and became their captain, so it all worked out in the end.

Slowly dragging her finger through the heavy dust coating a long table, Clem found herself at a dead end. In front of her was a brick wall.

“You have chosen wrong. Game over, *over, over*,” Clementine whispered to herself.

No wonder she hadn’t seen any other customers—they’d probably gotten lost and starved to death trying to escape. The thought of finding mummified remains made her skin crawl. Clementine suddenly felt very alone. Shivering, she turned around, ready to make a quick exit.

A wooden chest sat in the middle of the table she’d just run her finger across. Clem cocked her head to the side and stared at it. She could have sworn it hadn’t been there a moment ago. Taking a closer look, she could clearly see the line she’d drawn in the dust wander up to one side of the chest, stop, and pick up again on the other.

“I didn’t hear you come in. Can I help you?” A slow, mellow voice came from behind her.

Clementine gasped. She could feel the hairs rising on the back of her neck as she turned to face the wall.

Standing there was a man. Save for deep laugh lines at the edges of his broad smile, his skin was smooth as ivory. Topped with wiry eyebrows, his wide-set obsidian eyes reminded Clementine of a sloth. A thin white beard hung nearly to his waist. He could have been eighty or eight hundred and eighty; it was impossible to tell.

“New?” Pointing at the chest, Clementine did her best to sound like her grandmother.

“Nothing in this store is new,” the man answered.

"I suppose not," Clem replied. "What I meant was, did you just put it out?"

"No, that one's been here a while, though it tends to get around on its own. I think it might be magic." His eyes twinkled.

"I'm too old to believe in magic," Clem huffed.

"You young people these days, always so serious. There's magic everywhere—all you have to do is be open to it."

Lightly tugging on one of the four locked drawers lining the bottom of the chest, Clementine raised her eyebrows. Right, be open to magic, and it will be real. Adults were so weird. They were constantly telling you to "grow up" and "act your age," but when you did, they were suddenly upset you didn't believe in magic anymore.

The drawer didn't budge.

"Where are the keys?" Clem flipped open the top lid to see if they were inside, but all she found was a small mound of brown powder in a corner.

"Regretfully, they've been lost to time and space," he replied.

Clem couldn't help but think this man and the Professor would get along great.

"Why do you ask? Do you like it?"

Though crackling and faded in spots, the gold trim made the light grain in the dark wood glow. A deep swirl of green-blue lacquer pooled like water between the raised gold lines of the round crests that adorned the lid and encircled each of the four keyholes. It was in remarkably good condition, considering it was probably hundreds of years old. Clem wondered where it had come from and who it had belonged to.

Grandma Eloise would have loved this place and this shiny wooden box. Clementine wasn't sure what she'd do with a

chest with no keys and only one useful drawer, but the longer she stared at it, the more she liked it.

Fondly tracing the golden lines on the lid, Clementine finally responded, "It's beautiful, but I don't have any money."

"That thing's been kicking around here so long I can't even remember how or when I acquired it. I swear I've sold it a half-dozen times in my lifetime, but it always finds its way back. I suppose no one wants a chest with drawers they can't open," he said, smiling sadly. "Not very useful, now I think about it. If you want it, you can have it."

"Really?" Clementine asked. "Oh, I couldn't just take it. I mean, even without keys, it must be worth something?"

Grandma Eloise would have said, *Take it and run, girl!*

"If you want it, it's yours. There's enough junk here, I won't notice it's gone. It's time its story continued beyond the walls of this old shop." The man stroked his beard and shrugged. "Besides, I get the feeling you need it as much as it needs you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Clem glanced at the chest and furrowed her eyebrows.

The old man didn't reply.

Clem turned to ask again, but he had vanished as quietly and mysteriously as he'd appeared. Clementine shivered. Picking up the surprisingly solid chest, she worked her way through the maze and back to the safety of the now-crowded bus stop.

The bus pulled up, and this time, she got on.

"Why are you so late? And where did that come from?" her mom asked the moment she walked through the front door.

Clem was hoping to make it to her room without being

seen, but her mom was a critical care nurse. Not even the tiniest details escaped her notice.

“I got it from an antiques store...which also explains why I’m late...because I stopped at an antiques store.” Clementine sighed.

“That’s not what I heard,” her brother quipped from the kitchen table. “I heard the bus left you standing on the street because you were so lost in la-la land you forgot to get on.

“You’re hopeless, Clem,” he added with a laugh.

“Your sarcasm isn’t appreciated, Clementine. That box looks expensive for a girl with no job.” Their mom shook her head disapprovingly.

Her sarcasm?! What about Fergus?! But Clementine had learned long ago, Fergus could do no wrong.

“She probably stole it to keep her drugs in.” Ferg looked up from his phone, a cocky grin spread across his face.

“Shut up, Fergus,” Clementine muttered. Sometimes, she couldn’t believe they were related, let alone they’d once been best friends.

“Clementine Eloise Lemons, are you on drugs? Do you know how high the odds are for a teenage addict to end up in the system? Or on the streets? Or worse, dead? Do you know how horrible it is to tell someone their child has died of an overdose? If I find drugs in your room...” Fergus looked entirely too pleased with himself as their mom ranted on.

It was always something. If Clem spent too much time alone in her room, she was obviously depressed. If she wasn’t hungry at dinner, she must have an eating disorder. Too much time online? Her brain was rotting. Too little time? She must not have enough friends. And now, apparently, coming home from lessons thirty minutes later than usual, carrying an antique wooden chest, was a sure sign she was a drug addict.

There was no winning.

Retreating to the silence of her bedroom, Clementine set the chest on her desk and dusted it off as best she could with the sleeve of her sweater. She had a ton of homework. Finding a permanent home for it would have to wait.

Clem plopped in her chair and opened her book bag to look for a pen. All she found, besides her laptop and textbook, were her favorite earrings, which she'd taken off during gym class.

Clementine opened the top of the box, ready to toss the earrings inside. The mound of brown powder she'd noticed at the antiques store was still in the corner. Clem dipped her finger in it and held it to her nose. It smelled spicy and sweet, like peppercorns and licorice. If her mother saw it, she'd probably lose her mind—insist it was some weird drug—and ground Clementine until her eighteenth birthday. Clem rolled her eyes. Turning the box upside down over the trash, she dumped whatever it was and wiped the remainder out with her sleeve. Satisfied it was gone, she set the earrings in the box, shut the lid, and flipped open her laptop.

CHAPTER 2

Andro dug deep in the woven basket hanging next to his hip and fished for another bundle of tender young rice shoots. As he thrust the green sprouts into the water at his wrinkled feet, he watched a vein of iridescent goo seep out of the nearby mud bank. Hitting the water, it expanded like a rainbow across the surface. His skin burned as the rainbow wrapped itself around his thin ankles. Wincing in pain, he willed himself to stand still and keep working. He dared not say anything. *Head down. Don't cause a scene. Never draw attention to yourself.*

The rice paddies were too close to the garbage heap. But then again, everything was too close to the garbage heap. The factories in the valley sent a constant stream of goods to Nimbina, and in return, they sent back an endless river of garbage. Andro's gaze followed the wave of trash to where it curled into the smog-filled sky. Its poison was seeping, leaching, creeping out in every direction like the tentacles of a giant jellyfish, killing everything it touched. The valley was slowly being consumed by trash and toxic waste.

Andro had a sinking feeling the rice wouldn't survive the season. If the toxic goo didn't kill it first, the mountain of garbage would eventually topple, burying everything—including the field—in its path. It was only a matter of time. But that wasn't Andro's business. His business was to plant the rice, then silently watch it wither until it was as brown and dead as everything else.

Never question the authority of the Black Peacock, at least not out loud. Certainly never in front of them. If he didn't say

anything and the crops died, that would be his fault too. He might lose a few Coin or be retasked to a worse job, but at least he wouldn't be labeled a traitor. At least his granny and little sister would be safe. Hungry but safe. There was no winning at this game.

Andro despised the Black Peacock with every fiber of his being. He tried not to. He knew it was wrong; he just couldn't help himself. Beyond power, the Black Peacock didn't care about anyone or anything. Why should he care about them? The more his feet burned, the more the blood boiled in his veins. Sometimes, it felt as if he would explode. If only he were bigger, stronger, smarter, older. If only Granny and Zari didn't depend on him for their survival. Then he'd show them. He'd be like his father, only he wouldn't get caught.

After curfew, when Granny was asleep, he'd sneak out of the house and graffiti the symbol of the New Resistance somewhere the Bird would see it. He'd only snuck out once or twice before, and each time he'd told himself he'd never do it again—it was too risky. But the more his feet burned, the less he cared. It would make the pain worth it. Andro smiled. That would make his fourteenth birthday special, give it meaning. Yes, that is what he would do.

Andro's hand hit the bottom of his basket. Looking down, he was dismayed to find it empty. The burning in his feet had made him concentrate too hard and work too fast. Now he'd be required to take another full basket. He glanced at the smog-filled sky. The faint glow in the west suggested it was late afternoon. Most days, he'd gladly take another basket. Extra work meant extra Coin. Extra Coin meant extra food, and there was never enough food. But today was his birthday. Even though he knew they couldn't afford it, he deserved one early day a year, right?

Andro couldn't be seen with an empty basket. From their elevated perches, the spotters would see he wasn't working. They'd signal the enforcers, who would reluctantly go see what was wrong. The retaliation would be swift and brutal if they had to get up from their shaded post.

Without straightening—a sure sign his basket was empty—Andro scanned the field for someone struggling under their own workload. A few rows ahead, his elderly neighbor, Ablikim, was doubled over under the weight of a nearly full basket. Ablikim was too old to work like this, but he no longer had children to support him. He'd once had a son, but that was long ago. They were tinkerers back then, fixers of all things broken—and everything in the valley was broken.

When Andro was seven, the Black Peacock's agents had dragged his parents and Ablikim's son away in the middle of the night. They called them traitors. Said they were rebels. Andro's granny had lost her job as a seamstress in Nimbina, and the Black Peacock burned the tinker shop to the ground. Nobody wanted to be seen associating with the father of a traitor. Friendless and alone, Ablikim had ended up in the fields, just like Andro. Andro had always wanted to ask the old man about it, but there was no use speaking about what was.

Still bent low, Andro worked toward Ablikim, backing into him with enough force to knock the old man and his basket to the ground.

"Grandfather Ablikim!" Andro cried dramatically. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you there!"

Andro could feel the spotters' eyes drilling into the back of his head. The enforcers leaned forward in their chairs, watching from the shade. Andro raised his hand and bowed low in apology. Helping Ablikim to his feet, he hurriedly

gathered the shoots that had fallen from the old man's basket and placed them in his own. Andro winked, Ablikim nodded in appreciation, and they silently went back to work as if nothing had happened.

Andro waited a few long minutes before daring to glance toward the spotters' watch post or the enforcers' barracks. Thankfully, they were no longer paying attention. He was in the clear.

As Andro stood in line to turn in his basket that evening, he kept his head bent, hoping no one would notice his early departure. Andro was usually one of the last to leave. The people in line shuffled forward. His stomach growled. He excitedly thought about his birthday dinner. It would be rice and beans, as always; his pay didn't stretch far enough to buy much else. But tonight, they'd add a pinch of the secret spice Granny saved for special occasions, and that would make all the difference in the world.

The records keeper, a stern woman with a blunt State-approved haircut, stared at Andro over the rim of her thick glasses, and impatiently cleared her throat.

Andro looked up, startled and embarrassed. He'd been so excited about dinner he hadn't been paying attention.

"May the sun never set on the Empire of the Black Peacock," he mumbled, dutifully raising his left hand in salute.

"Yes"—the woman patriotically saluted back—"may the sun never set on the Empire of the Black Peacock."

Andro glanced at the sky streaked with the black smoke the factories belched out day and night, night and day. The sun could never set on the Empire of the Black Peacock because it never rose.

The woman pursed her pencil-thin lips and began to tally his baskets for the day. Her drab gray suit, the official uniform

of the Regime, was perfectly fitted to her squat body—the jet-black emblem of the Black Peacock shining over her heart. Andro wondered if the woman had been tasked as a records keeper or if she’d volunteered to serve. Even though the fields didn’t pay well, he was glad he was a field hand. He’d rather starve than voluntarily serve the Bird.

“You’re a basket shorter than usual.” The woman didn’t bother looking up from her clipboard. “Good numbers make good laborers.”

She flicked him away with a wave of her hand.

Sitting beside a battered barrel of gray sludge water, Andro rinsed the mud off his wrinkled feet. His ankles were bright red and unbearably itchy, but at least the skin wasn’t peeling off yet. Gingerly slipping his toes into his too-small sandals, he rolled down the damp legs of his linen trousers. For a brief while, he was free.

The walk back to the city from the fields was, by far, the best part of his day. Especially now that it was spring and the cherry trees lining the path were in full bloom. The first snow of winter was another favorite time, but lately, it didn’t take long for the soot from the factories to turn the snow as steely gray as the sky. As the days shortened and the heavens darkened, it felt as if the world itself were the last embers of a dying flame. During the darkest days, Andro eagerly awaited the first cherry buds for assurance spring would indeed return. When the cherries were ripe, they would leave the muddy rice paddies to pick cherries under the shade of the gnarled trees. With each passing year, the summers shortened, and the winters lengthened. Sometimes, it felt as if the cherry trees would never bloom again. This year, spring had come later than ever. The flowers were thick, but they seemed abnormally anemic. It was as if, little by little, the color was

being drained from the entire world. How long would it be until everything went dark?

Even when all hope seems lost, Andro, Granny liked to tell him, the cherry tree will still find a way to blossom.

Andro looked at the pale pink flowers hanging overhead, blocking the gloomy sky. If he didn't think too hard about it, he could almost imagine he was elsewhere—Nimbina even. He'd never been to the great city hidden in the hills above the valley, but Granny had told him it was beautiful. In Nimbina, the sky was a brilliant blue. Andro closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would look like if the sky were blue, purple, or any color other than gray. He wondered why they chose blue and whose job it was to paint it. If he could have chosen any task, that's the one he'd have picked. He would have been in charge of painting the sky blue.

A gentle breeze blew through the orchard. Andro opened his eyes and looked around. When he was certain no one was watching, he stretched out his arms and spun in circles as the petals rained down around him. Near the edge of town, he cut a small branch of blossoms to take home.

Andro found his granny and his little sister, Zari, sitting at the tiny three-person table under the window. Granny was teaching Zari to mend socks. Zari hated sewing, but it made sense she would become a seamstress when she was tasked on her twelfth birthday. The women in the family had always been, and would always be, seamstresses.

Zari was frail and dainty. She looked more like an eight-year-old than the eleven she was. Andro doubted she'd be able to perform any other task. He certainly couldn't see her in the fields, a factory, or a mine. Being a seamstress was, at least, a desirable job. If she worked hard, she might even get invited to sew for the elite in Nimbina, just as Granny had. Andro

hated the idea of his sister working for the Bird, but he had to admit the extra Coin (and full cupboards) would be nice.

“Here, Granny, I picked this for you.” Andro kissed his granny on the forehead and placed the cherry branch on the table in front of her. He walked to the stove and set to boiling water for rice and beans.

“You’re such a thoughtful boy, Andro.” The woman’s face softened into a warm smile.

As dinner bubbled, Andro walked over to the cupboard. The shelves were bare save for a jar of rice, a nearly empty sack of beans, a shaker of clumpy salt, and the old spice chest. The emptiness made the small cabinet look much larger than it was. He’d have to work a lot longer days if the three of them were going to make it through the next winter. Andro felt a twang of guilt for coming home early. Carefully, he set the heavy spice chest on the table.

Andro smiled fondly at the battered chest and marveled at its beauty. There were four keyed drawers under the top compartment, but the locks had been broken—and the keys lost—long before it came to them. No matter. They’d never owned anything worth locking up anyway. The drawers remained emptier than the cupboards.

Andro ran a calloused finger over the raised golden crest adorning the lid. He loved how the royal blue and green lacquer shone like a deep pool from within the raised gold lines. The colors were so vivid and deep. When he was young, he imagined they were a lake. Andro laughed, remembering how he used to wish he could dive in and swim to the other side. The other side of what—that he never did figure out. But in his young mind, things were better on the other side.

Even with the broken locks, it was the most extravagant thing they owned. It had been in their family for so long that

its discovery had become a legend bordering on myth. Granny insisted it belonged to royalty in the time before the Black Peacock. When he was starving and food was scarce, Andro wondered if the chest had any value. But Granny would never allow him to sell it; it was, after all, magic.

For Andro, opening the chest was as much a birthday tradition as spicing the rice. When he was young, Granny would place it in the center of the table and, while the rice boiled, tell them tales of the “magic chest” and the mysterious gifts it had brought their family. Exotic jewelry, funny figurines, odd coins. Even the spice had been a gift from the magic box. After Granny finished telling her story, Andro and Zari would lift the lid, and the three of them would eagerly peek inside, hoping to find treasure.

Finding the box empty had been disappointing when he was a boy. Now Andro was older, he understood the story as more of a fable about the importance of hope and believing in the impossible. Granny was always trying to teach them some sort of lesson.

Or maybe the “magic chest” was Granny’s way of explaining how she acquired items that could only have come from Nimbina. Spices hadn’t been traded in the valley for eons. Granny certainly never had the money to purchase the jewelry and trinkets she “found” in the chest. He couldn’t imagine Granny stealing from the wealthy women she’d worked for—it was far too risky—but there was no other explanation.

Granny must have realized he no longer believed in magic because she hadn’t told the story in years. These days, finding there was still something left of the dwindling pile of spice was all the treasure he needed. Andro smiled at the old woman, her arthritic fingers fumbling with the thin needle and sock,

and wondered, with a heart full of sorrow, how many birthdays they had left together.

“Granny, will you tell us the story of the magic chest?” Andro lit the lantern above the table and drew the curtains.

Zari’s eyes sparkled in the faint light. She was still a child; she loved her granny’s stories.

“You haven’t asked for my story in so long, I thought maybe you’d outgrown it. I guess I’d better make this time count, in case you never ask again!” The elderly woman cleared her throat.

“Our story,” she started dramatically, “begins long after the Empire of the Emerald Peacock had fallen but before the Black Peacock had fully fanned its feathers. Emperor Cetin and his cruel regime terrorized the people of the mountains. Some said he was especially cruel to the mountain people because he believed they were hiding his sister, Princess Cyra. She had murdered their father, and he would leave no stone unturned to find her and bring her to justice. Some believed it was revenge on the monks, who opposed his brutality and use of excessive force. Still, others thought it was his way of strengthening the empire. I think it was because the Black Peacock is, and always has been, evil to its core.”

Andro glanced toward the tiny window, trying to pierce the curtain and the darkness beyond to see who might be listening. The streets had eyes and ears. What if a passerby heard Granny’s murmured malcontent? Andro shivered at the thought of what might happen.

“Village by village, Prince Cetin rounded up everyone in the Videt Mountains and dragged them into the valley—burning crops and leveling villages as he went. Eventually, the Black Army made it to Cyrus. The villagers were not caught off guard, but against the might of the Black Army, they didn’t

stand a chance. When the battle ended, the few villagers left were taken prisoner. They left with only the clothes on their backs and the few items they could carry. The march out of the mountains took days upon days. The people were given little food or water and were forced to walk long hours without rest. Those who became too weak to walk were beaten and left for dead. The Black Army was as ruthless then as they are now.

“One night, the prisoners made camp in the ruins of a long-abandoned monastery. While everyone slept, a solitary boy snuck into the shadows to look for an escape. Lodged beneath a pile of rubble, he saw something glinting in the moonlight. Digging deep, he pulled out this chest. When he flipped the top lid open, he was amazed to see it was full of sweet treats. He brought the box of treats back to camp and hid it in his sack. The more treats he shared, the more treats appeared. This boy was the first in our family to receive gifts from the magic chest, and those gifts are what allowed our people to survive the long journey out of the mountains.

“Eventually, the sweets dried up, but the chest brought other gifts through the ages. Your great-great-grandfather once found enough gold to buy a cow. Imagine a lowly laborer owning a cow! The Bird didn’t like that at all. When I was a little girl, the chest gifted us all sorts of exotic jewels and trinkets. Mother would secretly sell them to the wealthy women she worked for in Nimbina. Those were good times, we ate well back then. Since the chest was left to me, mostly oddities have turned up: strange coins, a ring or two, this—” Granny held up a toy car with plastic wheels.

“I’m not sure what it is, but the chest felt I should have it, so I keep it safe. Before you were born, books with strange markings appeared. Your father was obsessed with those...”

she trailed off.

“The spices appeared after you were born, and then, the gifts stopped again. Enough talk! Open the lid and see if the chest has brought us anything new to mark this special day!”

Even though she tried to hide it, Andro knew Granny faithfully checked the chest every day. She had to know it was empty. Still, he smiled at her enthusiasm. For a brief moment, he stared at the box with the same hope and wonder he’d had as a child.

“Ready, Zari?” Andro tried to sound excited.

Zari grinned from ear to ear.

Closing his eyes, Andro breathed deep in anticipation of the pungent aroma that had faithfully greeted him for as many birthdays as he could remember. Together, he and Zari flipped open the lid.

As he looked inside, Andro’s heart stopped.

Though the aroma still lingered fresh in the old chest, every last trace of spice was gone! How had this happened? Andro knew the pile was dwindling, but he could’ve sworn there was enough to last a few more birthdays. He slammed the lid shut, leaped across the tiny expanse of floor between the table and the cupboard, and ran his hand across the barren shelf. Not a single speck of spice coated his fingers.

Andro walked back to the table. Throwing himself in his chair, he rested his head in his arms. His birthday was ruined.

“Andro, what’s wrong?” Granny squinted to see in the dim glow of the lamp.

“It’s empty, Granny,” Zari replied.

“The spice is gone now. See?” Andro flipped the lid of the chest back open.

Granny leaned across the table and peered into the opened compartment.

“That’s because the chest has given you a gift, child,” she gasped. “Finally, the magic is working again! Remove it quickly before the chest thinks we’re ungrateful and takes it back!”

Andro took another look. Sitting in the center was a set of shiny gold loops with sparkly stones dangling from the bottom.

Mouth open, he stared in disbelief. They had not been there a moment earlier. Of this, he was sure. Andro snatched them up.

“What do you think they are?” Andro didn’t dare take his eyes off of them for fear they’d disappear.

“They’re earrings, child. The ladies of Nimbina hang them in their ears like this.” Granny held one of the loops to her earlobe.

“But what are they for?” Andro asked. “Do they make you hear better or something?”

He held one to his ear as a test and whispered, “Hello.” There was no noticeable difference. He frowned. They had to have some kind of practical use, right? Everything had a purpose.

“No,” Granny said, chuckling. “They’re jewelry. Decoration. Like an ornament for your ears. All the ladies of Nimbina wear them, even the empress.”

“I don’t get it.” Andro gently set the golden loop back on the table.

Zari snatched them up and held them to her ears, tossing her head from side to side.

“Well, I like the idea of something with no purpose beyond beauty.” The stones bounced off her cheeks. “Like the branch of cherry blossoms you brought home. They could have been fruit, but instead, they lay on the table, being beautiful. Maybe

Nimbina isn't as bad as you think it is."

Andro rolled his eyes. *Girls.*

He still didn't get it, but they had to be worth something if the empress wore them. Maybe even enough to stock the shelves for the next winter and give a little something to Ablikim. Andro couldn't help but get his hopes up. After all, if the tale of the magic chest was true, maybe anything was possible.

"What do you think they're worth?" He snatched them back from Zari, who whimpered in protest. "How do we sell them?" How could he get rid of these "earrings" without causing suspicion? Who would believe a family like his had come by such lavish things honestly? If the wrong person found out he had them, they'd report him to collect the reward. Who would buy such a thing without asking questions? Andro had done dubious things before, but nothing like this. He didn't even know where to begin.

"Tomorrow," Granny replied in little more than a whisper, "when you go to buy food for the week, wait until just before the store closes. When you're sure you're alone, tell Rozi you have something to trade. He'll offer you far less than they're worth. Tell him your granny will come and beat him with her broom if he isn't fair with you. Take Coin or goods, not credit. Don't get caught. Don't be seen."

When the house was quiet, and he was sure his granny and sister were asleep, Andro opened the door and slipped into the inky-black night. His feet still itched, and he wanted revenge.