

CHAPTER

4

Gordy bounded down the basement stairs, cycled through the combination lock, and then heaved open the heavy metal door to the Stitser lab. He instinctively ducked beneath a drying rack hooked to the ceiling where all manner of plants and herbs dangled like the whiskers of a gigantic walrus. Toadflax, garlic, barberry, and arrowroot, to name a few. Three apothecary tables lined one of the side walls with multiple drawers bearing labels such as *Monarch Wings*, *Porcupine Quills*, and *Shaved Ivory*. A long oak table stood in the middle of the room with a collection of flasks, crucibles, and Bunsen burners. Embedded in the far wall was a soot-stained fireplace that pumped smoke through a vented chimney in the bricks. And stacked neatly against the stove were several pots of varying shapes and metals. “Cauldrons” as Gordy’s mother preferred to call them.

A beige sign hung from a hook above the stove, listing the Five Rules of Potion Making.

DO NOT DUPLICATE
THE ETERNITY ELIXIR

1. Never draw unnecessary attention to the potion community.
2. Never administer a potion to anyone without first testing it out on yourself.
3. Never cause permanent bodily harm or death with a potion.
4. Never concoct a potion using banned ingredients.
5. Never enter the Forbidden Zones.

Specialized air freshener in hand, Gordy unzipped the plastic shield surrounding Bawdry. Even though he was wearing a gas mask, Gordy retreated a step from the smell. Yellowish vapors rose from the opening, and he unleashed a heavy spray from the can, filling the bag.

“Bawdry, you need a bath!” Gordy zipped up the shield, turned on the oscillating fan next to one of the apothecary tables, and waited for the noxious levels in the air to dissipate before removing the gas mask.

Bawdry didn't respond.

Bawdry couldn't respond.

That was because Bawdry was the mummified remains of King Bawdry of Mesopotamia. Gordy's mom had won him at an auction during one of her conferences two years ago. Now all manner of tubes, sensors, and wires ran out of the mummy's body, supplying numerous flasks and vials with fluid. High-level potion-making material. Stuff Gordy didn't dare fiddle with since he had no doubt those were the types of chemicals capable of the disastrous results

his mom frequently warned him about. Spraying the inside of the bag with air freshener and the occasional changing of a flask or two was all his mother would permit Gordy to do.

“Can we come down now?” Gordy’s best friend, Max Pinkerman, shouted from the top of the stairs.

Gordy glanced at a flowerpot resting next to King Bawdry’s bag. A pale yellow flower was beginning to nudge its way out from its glistening green pod. “The canary bellflower is blooming,” he announced. “All clear.”

The sound of charging footsteps filled the stairwell as Max bounded down to the basement level. Joining Gordy, Max stared at the mummy encased in its protective shielding. Max took in a deep breath and promptly gagged.

“Bleck! It still stinks in here.”

Adilene descended the stairs with her fingers pinching her nostrils closed. “I hope it’s safe,” she said, her voice echoing. “Because if I end up poisoned or hexed in some way, I’m going to be very upset.” Adilene was wearing her earbuds and the sound of heavy music thrashed out from under her long black hair.

“You won’t get poisoned,” Gordy assured her.

“What?” she shouted before removing one of the buds.

Gordy grinned. “What are you listening to?”

Adilene lived in the house kitty-corner to the Stitsers, and Gordy had been friends with her since her family moved to the neighborhood from El Salvador six years ago. She usually listened to much softer music.

Adilene frowned and glanced at her iPod. “This is uh . . . Cattle Slayer, I think.”

“Why are you listening to that?” Max asked, scowling.

“It’s for my end-of-term science project,” Adilene said. “We have two weeks left before it’s due, and I’m guessing you haven’t even started. Have you, Maxwell?”

Max scoffed and swatted his hand dismissively. “I’ve got plenty of time. Besides, how does listening to that garbage have anything to do with science?”

Adilene smiled. “I’m studying the effects different music has on moods. Right now it’s Death Metal, and I think it’s making me angry.”

Max snickered. “I don’t think that’s the music’s fault.” He gazed longingly at the murky bag where Bawdry slumbered and elbowed Gordy in the side. “What’s it like?” The shield’s material was too opaque to see through, though Gordy noticed Max trying, his eyes narrowing to slits so thin, they could’ve been sealed shut.

“He’s gross,” Gordy said. “Kind of like a meaty skeleton, but one that’s wearing a cloth diaper.” The mummy had been dead for centuries, but Gordy often felt sorry for the emaciated man, forced to reside in his plastic enclosure, wearing only his underwear. *Poor Bawdry*, Gordy thought.

“*Incroyable!*” Adilene exclaimed, finally taking her eyes off Bawdry and absorbing the scenery of the Stitser lab. She plucked the remaining bud from her ear and silenced the clattering noise of Cattle Slayer. “This is it, no? Your mother’s lab.” She approached the closest apothecary table

and timidly reached for one of the containers resting on the counter before withdrawing her hand. “May I?” she asked Gordy politely.

“Yeah, sure. Everything on that table is relatively safe,” Gordy said. “Just be careful and don’t spill anything.”

Adilene carefully plucked one of the vials from the counter and read the label. She made a sour face. “Is this really koala kidneys?”

Gordy smiled. “If that’s what it says.”

Max grunted. “It’s not from an actual koala. Probably just a fake one.”

Adilene rolled her eyes. “Fake koalas?”

“You know what I mean,” Max said.

Gordy took his two friends on a tour of the lab. Adilene asked a plethora of questions regarding the various containers of mysterious ingredients and their uses and functions. There were hundreds of vials, each carefully marked in Mrs. Stitser’s near-perfect penmanship.

Max seemed interested, but he split his time listening to Gordy while keeping his eyes glued to Bawdry slumped in the corner. It was only Gordy pointing out the bottom left-hand drawer of the third apothecary table—the one Mrs. Stitser had strictly forbidden—that piqued Max’s interest.

“What sort of stuff?” Max squatted to take a closer look at the drawer marked *Volatile*.

“Seriously, Maxwell, don’t touch that!” Adilene had moved away from the table, her arms folded, her body tense and rigid.

“Chill out. I’m not touching anything,” Max said, trying unsuccessfully to tug the drawer open.

“Sorry, guys. We can’t even look in there.” Gordy had never been allowed to even peek inside, but he figured it contained the most dangerous items of everything in the lab. He was positive his mom had some sort of alarm that would trigger at any intrusions.

“Well, this is all really cool,” Adilene said. “It’s just like you told us.”

“Thanks.” Gordy felt a sense of pride swelling in his chest.

For the past several years, ever since his mom first allowed him access to the basement, Gordy had been forced to keep the existence of the Stitser lab a secret. It was dangerous to let outsiders know about the potion community. At the time, Gordy hadn’t understood why it was so dangerous, but he obeyed his mother’s wishes just the same. His brother and sister vaguely understood that something was going on in the lab, but their mom had fed them a long-lasting potion of forgetfulness to prevent them from accidentally revealing the secret to one of their school friends. She had administered the same potion to Gordy when he had been the twins’ age, but after a few days, the effects of the draught had mysteriously worn off. It had baffled his mom at first, until Gordy revealed to her how he had devised a concoction of his own which countered the forgetful nature of his mom’s potion. His mom had taken him downstairs to the lab the very next day.

And now, here he was, showing Max and Adilene his secret world. The world of potion-making.

Max plucked a small vial of liquid from the counter and held it close to his eyes. “I can’t even read this,” he said. He reached out to set the vial back on the counter, but missed and nearly dropped it.

Luckily, the glass didn’t shatter, but the vial rolled along the countertop, heading for the edge. Gordy was about to leap over to keep it from falling, but Adilene got there first.

“*¡Eres tan torpe!*” Adilene snapped, carefully catching the vial and handing it to Gordy. “Maybe we’re not ready to be down here.”

Gordy shrugged. Adilene was probably right. Neither one possessed the necessary skills to become an Elixirist. According to his mom, that was something you were born with. But Gordy didn’t mind. Max and Adilene were his best friends, and as far as he was concerned, they made the perfect lab partners.