

# Chapter 1

## Tofu and Brown Rice

Cedrik's body dangled helplessly within the pit's gaping mouth, supported solely by Annie's grip upon his wrist.

"Climb Cedrik! Climb!" Annie called out urgently, her muscles quivering under the strain of their combined weight.

"I can't!" Cedrik yelled back, agony etched all too clearly in his voice. His injured arm, already painful before his fall, now burned as if on fire. However much he might've wished to, Cedrik simply couldn't summon up the strength to do anything more than hang helplessly beneath her.

"You've got to," cried Annie. "I can't hold on much longer!"

"Let me go Annie! You can't help me. Save yourself! LET GO!" Cedrik gasped sharply as Annie's grip on his wrist slipped and then caught again. The pain from his wound flared as torn muscle and sinew ripped even further apart, causing the small red stain upon his tunic to blossom into a crimson flower of warm blood.

"I won't let you fall!" Annie shouted. She tightened her grip, determined to save her friend.

"I've failed," sobbed Cedrik with bleak despair. "Danlin told me not to come; he knew I'd fail and

now I have. But it's not just me that'll suffer. I brought you along with me when I should have made you stay behind. If you don't leave me we'll both die. And I'm not going to let you pay for my mistakes! At least I'll die knowing that I kept one of us alive!" Without wasting another moment, Cedrik reached down, snatched his dagger from its leather sheath, and swung his arm upward, slashing at Annie.

Taken by surprise, Annie reacted instinctively, releasing her grip and jerking her body away from the blade. *What?! Is he crazy?!* Annie thought in wild confusion. Almost instantly it dawned on her. Cedrik wasn't crazy at all. He *wanted* her to release him.

Cursing herself for being manipulated so easily, Annie lunged forward, desperately trying to grab Cedrik once more. She failed. Cedrik dropped rapidly out of sight, his body disappearing into the murky darkness.

Stunned, Annie stared down into the pit. How could everything have gone so wrong so quickly? What could she do? The harsh voices of the berserkers could be heard more loudly now, closing in with each passing second. Her heart torn by grief, Annie shouted out defiantly. "You won't win! Do you hear me? You won't!" The cold wind whipped the words back in her face, mocking her anguish.

"Aaah, forget it," Roger exclaimed in disgust, pushing his keyboard away. "Killing off my two principal characters – just brilliant. I've had enough for one night. I'm going to bed."

Getting up from his desk, Roger walked to the doorway, flicked off the light, and walked quietly down the hallway. His story hung suspended, the words glowing softly on the small computer monitor.

*SPLAT!*

Elbow on table and chin resting on her upturned hand, Rosie gazed discontentedly at the milky-white cube that had just splashed down onto her dinner plate. *I can't believe this!* she thought moodily to herself. *Tofu and brown rice again! Why does Mom keep making this stuff? It tastes absolutely awful.* Rosie speared another chunk of tofu on her fork and regarded it with distaste. "Hey, I know!" She put down her fork and beamed brightly across the table at her father. "How 'bout we do something wild and crazy and order a pizza?!"

After a few seconds her smile faded away as she realized he hadn't heard a single word. *Here we go again,* she thought with a quiet sigh as she saw him reach up and start twisting a stray curl of hair. Rosie could always tell when things weren't going well with her father's work, even before he spoke. Whenever he was troubled, he would fiddle with his hair, twirling strands of it around and around his finger. After an hour or so he would be rather, well, unique looking. Her father's current problem must have been especially vexing. Rosie had never before seen quite so many twists of long black curls sticking out from his scalp.

"Aaargh! Marge, everything's all balled up in a knot and I can't figure out how to untie it!" he exclaimed, looking toward Rosie's mother. "I keep doing this to myself! Writing myself into a corner and leaving no way out."

"I wouldn't worry too much Roger," answered Marge, smiling encouragingly at him. "It always seems to work out eventually. Doesn't it?"

"Mmm, maybe," he grudgingly conceded. "But if I simply worked my stories out at the start, I wouldn't have to go through all this. Just think, the whole story plotted out and all I'd need to do is fill in the words."

"But you've said it yourself a million times dear," countered Marge. "You don't work that way. The story has to flow out of you a bit at a time. How do you put it?" Her lips pursed and she frowned for a moment as she searched

her memory. “The story has to write itself! That’s what you always tell me.”

“Yes, I know. I know ... I know ... I KNOW!” exploded Roger, yanking so hard at his hair that several strands actually came away in his fingers. “It’s like I’m only there to chronicle what’s happening to my characters. And then, if the plot gets itself all bollixed up, I’m stuck! Like now!!” he exclaimed, slamming his fork down.

Having grown accustomed to her father’s moods after all these years, Rosie didn’t hesitate to jump in. “So Dad,” she asked. “What exactly is the deal with the story? What’s the problem this time?”

Roger turned to regard his daughter, happy to air his troubles. “Well Rosie, it’s like this. I thought I’d start a new series of stories all taking place in a world kind of like ours, but where things developed differently. Some of the creatures are the same as in ours, some slightly different, and some totally unique. No humans though. I decided that the first story wouldn’t be too complex, just a straightforward quest for an enchanted lamp.”

“Does it have a genie in it?” Rosie interrupted, her interest piqued. Ever since she’d been a little girl, she’d wanted a personal genie. The kind of genie that would give you more than just three wishes.

“No, no genie,” answered Roger impatiently, waving his hand as if to brush away the very idea. “It’s got nothing to do with any genies. But the lamp does have a power. Anyway, that’s not what’s causing my problem. You see, it’s been stolen, and the central characters are trying to find it and bring it back with them, all right? So, there I was, writing along nicely, and the story was getting interesting. Only it got a little too interesting. I don’t really see how the story can resolve itself now. The ones that stole the lamp are way ahead of them and my main characters aren’t in great shape.”

“Well, why not just have some magician help?” suggested Rosie helpfully.

Roger raised an eyebrow. “Look, you can’t just intro-

duce a character who waves a wand and fixes everything,” he explained patiently. “It all has to hang together. Otherwise it isn’t interesting to read. It’d be as if you could simply wave your hand and get your tofu to disappear. You’d lose all the human drama and suffering.”

“Roger!” cried Marge sharply, looking crossly at her husband. “You don’t have to start in too. It’s healthy and it’s good for us!”

Roger gave his daughter a conspiratorial wink before going on. “Anyway,” he continued. “I think I have to start over. When I finished up last night’s writing I had old Cedrik falling into a pit and his friend was about to get slaughtered by some warrior rats. Ah well. Cedrik wasn’t that much of an arnvash anyway.”

“A whatash?” asked Rosie, thinking she hadn’t heard correctly.

“An arnvash,” repeated her father. “You can think of him like an elf.”

“An elf? Your main character is an elf?” Does he have pointy ears and wings and dress in robes woven from spider webs?” Rosie had recently been reading a book like that in her literature class and she thought it all sounded pretty ridiculous. For one thing, Rosie couldn’t imagine how clothes could be woven from spider webs. After all, webs were sticky. For another thing, she thought it unlikely that anything that looked like a small human would have multi-colored dragonfly wings coming out of its back.

“No, he’s not an elf!” responded Roger testily. “I just said you could think of him like that. Easier than going into the details.”

“Well, if he’s not an elf then what is he?” persisted Rosie. “Give me all the details.” Anything that put off having to eat tofu was a good thing as far as Rosie was concerned.

“Well, okay, since you insist. In this world – which is called Liandra, by the way – in Liandra the dinosaurs didn’t all die out. Some kept evolving.”

“So? That’s the same as in *our* world,” Rosie cut in.

“That’s where the birds came from. Everybody knows that. You can Google it.”

Roger simply raised his eyebrows and stared at his daughter meaningfully.

“Oh,” said Rosie, slightly abashed. “I guess you knew that, huh?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Roger. “Anyway, to continue. In Liandra some of the smaller dinosaurs kept changing. Over time their feathers developed into fur and they invented language and tools and what-have-you.”

“Dinosaurs had scales, not feathers,” Rosie shot back, pleased to have scored a point off of her father.

“Nooo, lots of dinosaurs actually had feathers well before there were any birds,” said Roger. “You can look it up.”

Rosie glanced toward the family computer, visible through the doorway to the family room.

“In a book!” continued her father, opening his eyes wide in mock amazement. “Imagine that – facts in a book!”

“Okay dad, I get it,” said Rosie with a roll of her eyes. Roger was continually trying to get Rosie to read more books rather than just surfing the web.

“You see it now, right?” continued her father. “The smaller dinosaurs were already warm-blooded and over time they grew to be, well, kind of like elves, like I said before.”

“That’s totally awesome,” interjected Rosie.

“Thank you,” Roger answered, pleased with the compliment. “So, there are a couple of related species and the arnvashé are one of them.”

“I thought you said arnvash before, not arnvashé,” questioned Rosie.

“That’s just the plural,” responded Roger. “One arnvash, two arnvashé.”

Rosie made an ‘oh’ with her mouth and nodded.

“Anyway, Cedrik is one of the hunter-warrior types. But he’s pretty much an under-achiever. Doesn’t do well at all the things most other arnvashé excel at. And he’s a bit

small. For an arnvash, that is,” he added. “They’re all pretty small, of course. About so high.” He raised his hand about a foot above the tabletop. “That’s why I thought it would be interesting to have him be the one to get the lamp, rather than one of the others. But like I said, it isn’t really working out.”

“Can’t anybody help him?” Rosie found herself feeling sorry for Cedrik.

“I did have someone helping him, actually. A little owl.”

“A little owl?” questioned Rosie’s mother. “Aren’t owls big? Wouldn’t it just try to eat Cedrik?”

“The owl that flies around our neighborhood is pretty big, sure,” agreed Roger. But this is a Liandran Pygmy Owl. And she’s not interested in eating Cedrik. Grasshoppers, maybe.” Rosie suppressed a grimace at this.

“But not arnvashé,” continued Roger. “Anyhow, Annie has problems as well. Her wing’s out of commission and she can’t fly. And she’s about to get chopped into little bitty pieces by the bad guys.”

“Annie?” interrupted Rosie.

“The owl,” her dad answered. “I named her after your dog. She’s always seemed to be a big birdbrain to me.”

“She is not,” declared Rosie stoutly, defending her pet. “She’s just more, umm, thoughtful than the average dog.”

“Uh-huh,” said Roger with a disbelieving look. “Well, it’s not that big a deal if they don’t make it anyway, I suppose. I’ve got other characters who are also going for the lamp. Cedrik and Annie can just be a story thread that comes to an end,” he concluded as he pushed his chair back from the table, anxious to get back to his writing.

“Well, that definitely doesn’t sound very good to me,” stated Rosie forcefully, strangely upset at the fate of these characters. “You’ve worked all this time on Cedrik and Annie and now you’re just going to drop them? It doesn’t seem very fair.” Rosie was so perturbed that she actually shoved a spoonful of tofu into her mouth before she realized what she’d done.

“Well, life isn’t always fair you know,” answered Roger

with a shrug. “And why are you so worried about them? Tonight’s the first you’ve ever even heard about them.”

“I don’t know. But I still think you should do something else besides kill them off.”

“Maybe,” her father allowed, nodding his head. “If I come up with something tonight maybe I’ll write it out differently. But if I can’t think of something reasonable then I’ll just have to bid a fond farewell to Cedrik and Annie.”

Later that evening, after her schoolwork was as complete as it was going to get, Rosie pulled on her pajamas, stuck her head outside the bedroom door, and yelled downstairs. “G’night Mom, g’night Dad.”

“Night Rosie,” Roger called up. “Sweet dreams. Mom’s outside walking the dogs. Wish me luck in the story.”

“Good luck Dad,” answered Rosie. “And good luck to Annie and Cedrik,” she murmured softly to herself.

Rosie entered her room, stepping carefully to avoid the clothes that lay scattered across the floor. Her mom had been nagging her the last few days to get the room in some kind of order and she knew she’d have to pick up at least some of the junk to avoid a minor war. Maybe over the weekend.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Rosie walked to her desk, reached into one of the drawers, and withdrew what looked like an extra-large brown walnut. It seemed to be carved from a piece of dark wood, one so dense that the individual grain lines could hardly be seen. What made it look so walnut-like were the knobs and ridges scattered randomly over its surface. Some of these actually resembled words, but not ones Rosie recognized.

Rosie had found it a couple of years ago, buried deep within a cardboard box she’d come across in a dark corner of their cellar. After satisfying herself that it was by far

the most interesting object in the box, she'd brought it upstairs to her bedroom and had kept it there ever since.

She flopped down onto her bed and tried again, probably for the hundredth time, to make some sense of the strange markings that covered it. Turning it over, she noticed that something had changed since the last time she'd looked at it. There now seemed to be the faintest sign of a crack.

Tracing it with the edge of a fingernail, Rosie saw that the crack extended completely around the object, dividing it into two halves. *Maybe it just cracked with age*, she thought to herself. As she brought it up closer to her face to have a better look, her fingers unknowingly pressed on the three most prominent knobs, one after the other. With a sharp snick, both halves of the piece swung apart. Startled, Rosie dropped it onto her bedsheets.

A slight haze hung in the air before her, barely more than the usual dust that filled her room. As she stared down at the case, for it was now clear that it was a case of some kind, she became aware of a new odor. Elusive and mysterious, like a memory from long ago that flits just out of reach. A touch of cinnamon perhaps, and a musky spice that made her nose twitch. As the haze faded, so did the smell. Now that the box was open, Rosie could see the internal hinge that allowed it to separate. She saw that it was made of wood, but of a different type from the outside case, reddish and waxy to the touch. To her disappointment, the box was completely empty.

Minutes ticked by as Rosie opened and closed the case. For some reason it wouldn't latch closed anymore, smoothly swiveling open each time she shut it.

Finally, shrugging her shoulders, she turned off the light and put her head down on her pillow, examining the opened box in the moonlight that now streamed through her window. After a few more minutes her head sagged further down into the pillow and she closed her eyes. As her consciousness slowly spiraled down into the pleasant darkness, it seemed to Rosie that she heard a soft voice calling to

her. She tried to answer, but couldn't summon the energy.  
With a soft sigh, she slipped into a deep sleep.