

“Jon!” we yelled in unison as we walked into the clearing that marked Swimmer’s Point.

Jon was hanging wet clothes on a line that stretched from one corner of the cabin to the sweet gum tree growing at the water’s edge. The broad trunk of this one-hundred-and-thirty-foot tree developed on the shoreline so half of it was in the water and the other half rooted firmly on dry land. Erosion had taken its toll, but the tree thrived. That was why someone nicknamed it, “Swimmer” and the point, “Swimmer’s Point.” Campers climbed into its lower branches to rest in the shade of its shiny, star-shaped leaves and look across the lake. The daredevils would crawl out onto a low, thick branch to hang upside down as long as they could, then drop into the water.

“Hey!” Jon called back, surprised, “What brings you out here this early on a Sunday morning?” His smile welcomed us as he attached the last shirt to the line with the clothespin.

“We’re looking for Spyro’s treasure,” Josh declared.

“Mmmmm,” Jon looked inquisitive. “The first good idea of the day!” Jon picked up his basket and started inside. “You’ve come to the right place.”

“We have?” Nate asked as he followed. “Is it buried there?” He pointed at the Spyro’s headstone about thirty yards from the house.

Jon did not notice Nate point, but replied, “I’ve got a map sure to lead you right to it.”

We looked at each other curiously as we reached the porch and entered the house. We had agreed we would not bluntly ask to dig up Spyro’s grave to avoid offending Aiyana and to listen to learn what—if anything—Jon or Aiyana knew about the gold. Swiz asked us not to mention him at first either because he had never met Aiyana’s husband. Swiz wanted to stay outside until we had time to explain why we had come and reintroduce him to Aiyana after she realized the value of the clue we brought.

Nate looked back and noticed Swiz had landed among Swimmer’s branches.

“Hi, boys!” Aiyana greeted us quietly from where she scrambled eggs on the stove in the kitchen. “This is a surprise. What brings you here so early on a Sunday?”

Jon answered for us, “These sleuths seek your father’s treasure.”

Aiyana paused and looked intently at us.

Nate exclaimed, “It smells good in here!”

“I can add a few eggs if you’re hungry,” Aiyana said.

“Yes!” we chimed in together.

“How about French toast?” Nate added with a smile.

Jon smiled, “Does this look like a diner? We can make more toaster toast.”

“We’re starving!” I put in with a big smile as I walked over and hugged Aiyana. “I’ll do toaster toast.”

“Sure,” Aiyana pointed at the bread.

“So, ‘tis treasurrrrrre that ye be seekin me hearrrrrties?” Jon growled with a convincing pirate’s voice. He pulled some scrolls from the bottom drawer of an old chest as we laughed. “Gangway! Maps ‘ere chase a thousand golden doubloons!”

Aiyana remembered what her father had said in his letter to her: follow the children.

Josh and Nate sidled up next to Jon to look at the maps that Jon pulled out of a drawer and dropped on the table.

Opening them, Jon reverted to his normal voice. “Aiyana’s Daddy drew them up for fun for his beautiful daughter to play,” he said. Jon spread them across the table and weighted down their corners with cups and a butter dish.

I popped bread into the four-bay toaster and joined my brothers next to Jon. The first thing we noticed was that whoever had made the fake maps used the same leather for the scroll we had brought. I

think Nate pointed this out. But I added, “Our scroll is the real thing.” I held it up. “A real clue to find your father’s treasure, Aiyana.”

“Another map?” She said. “I thought I had them all. Where’d you get it?”

“We found it hidden on the banks of Roaring Brook.”

Aiyana looked interested but didn’t answer. She had just added the additional eggs to the hot skillet and had to multi-task. Plus the toast popped up.

Jon noticed the red and green jewels stitched into our scroll as he reached out and grabbed it from me when I went over to butter the toast.

Aiyana said, “You found it buried somewhere near Roaring Brook?”

Josh explained how someone had wedged the scroll inside a crevice and how Nate had to dislodge it with an arrow, but he didn’t yet mention Swiz. I wanted to tell Aiyana about Swiz right away, but I relented when Nate started to talk.

Nate filled in more details about the sunbeam and the features of the bridge. “It was so well hidden until the sunbeam lit up the crevice like magic!”

“Poof!” Jon quipped.

Aiyana spread several plates on the table and invited everyone to dig in. That’s when she first touched our scroll. She looked especially interested in the jewels stitched into the fabric. One fascinated her: a crescent moon-shaped emerald. She insisted we sit down, but she just stood at her place sliding her fingertips across the emerald. I wanted to bring up Swiz, but Aiyana told us to eat the eggs and toast growing cold on the table, she read the words of the clue.

*“Beneath the headstone
Where the owl burns,
Lies the treasure for which
Camp Aleafin yearns.”*

Aiyana remarked casually, “This is my father’s handwriting,” as if the detail was neither remarkable nor essential.

I finished my eggs and said, “We think the clue hints that someone buried your father’s treasure beneath his headstone. Could it be buried with him?”

Aiyana politely excused herself as if she hadn’t heard my question and walked into another room.

“Oops! Did I insult her?” I said.

“Maybe,” Josh said.

Jon looked incredulous. “Did I understand you to say you want to dig up Spyro’s grave?”

We hesitated and looked at each other.

Finally, I answered, “Well, kind of.”

“Come on,” Jon said. “You’re not serious. Aiyana will not be amused.” He lifted the corners of his fake maps and suggested we play with them the rest of the day. “Who knows what you’ll uncover, but I suppose you’ll have some fun. I think you offended Aiyana, so…”

I interrupted, “We’re not kidding and didn’t crash your pad to have breakfast or for fun. We’re looking for the real treasure.”

Jon sighed, “What? Now you’re offending me. No one is digging up her father’s grave! That is patently ridiculous. And I don’t think your parents will find this amusing either. What has gotten into you, Kids?”

Aiyana walked back into the room holding a necklace with a green emerald dangling from its end. "My mother gave this to me. The emerald stitched into this scroll matches it exactly." She held hers up against the other. "Where did you find this scroll?"

We started to talk all at once.

"One at a time, please," Aiyana murmured. "Go first, Gabe."

I handed Aiyana my pocket sketchpad where I had drawn a picture of the bridge and the embankment where we had found the scroll. I explained. "Swiz, the talking owl, pulled it out of a crevice where it was hidden nearby the Roaring Brook Bridge after Nate stuck an arrow in it. Our search began when ..."

"Swiz?" Aiyana gasped. "You've seen my father's owl?"

"He should be right outside," Nate said and pointed to the front door. Swiz's penchant for disappearing without telling us explains why Nate sounded wishy-washy.

Aiyana and Jon gazed with astonishment at the door as Nate bounded across the room to open it. Josh followed right behind him, and they yelled from the front porch, "Swiz."

Seconds later, Aiyana and Jon heard the sound of wings flapping and a light thud. Swiz marched into the house! Aiyana stared at him like she saw a ghost.

Swiz stopped and spread his wings. "Good morning!" he announced.

Aiyana burst out crying and laughing simultaneously! When she reached him, she dropped to her knees. She reached out and touched his head and lightly stroked his wings. Swiz searched her face as she muttered about waiting for him and the treasure and wondering when her wait would end. "Where have you been?" she stammered. "Were you in the gorge?"

On the day Swiz departed from Spyro's side, he flew east, banked north, and turned west for seven miles until he disappeared somewhere in the forest growing around the Chautauqua Gorge, a massive ravine with a creek flowing through it. Its walls were layers of siltstone and stacks of shale. Layers of fossils, mostly from clams, oysters, mussels, and moss animals, could be plainly observed in the rock. Huge, colorful igneous and metamorphic boulders were strewn everywhere, deposited there thousands of years ago as the glaciers that once covered the earth retreated. Sixteen hundred acres of deciduous forest surrounded the gorge, a perfect place for Swiz to hide until the time came for his return.

Swiz said tenderly. "Today is the day that we finally find whatever your father has kept hidden for all these difficult months."

As she touched him gently with her soft hands, her eyes closed and she slipped into a trance-like state. A parade of slow-motion images coursed through her consciousness led by her mother, Krsta, who had died after Aiyana turned eight years old. Aiyana danced in a circle as she held her hands, and laughed as her mother chased her on a forest trail. They embraced in an open field with flowers flourishing all around. Aiyana watched as Krsta paddled a canoe into the shore. She pulled the boat up onto the sand, bent down, and embraced Aiyana. Aiyana shuddered slightly as her father appeared. He lifted her hands to his and whispered, "Trust the children." He released her, and her parents faded into a vanilla haze as she opened her eyes.

Swiz, Jon, and the boys came back into Aiyana's focus. She lost her balance as she stood up, but Jon caught her. He wiped the tears from her face and hugged her gently, guiding her to a nearby chair. I was surprised when he turned to Swiz and asked, "OK, is this a trick? Where's the hidden camera? How can an owl talk?"

Swiz answered, "How can it be that the sun and moon know each day when to appear and disappear? How can it be that babies are born? How can there be music? How can it be that fish are dressed so beautifully in colors and patterns?" Swiz flew across the room and perched on the sill of an

open window where a soft, cool breeze entered the cabin-like house. “Yes, I can talk. Someday I’ll share how that’s possible, but not today. Today we’ve got no time to lose. Today is one of those rare moments where we must work together. The forces have gathered that want to destroy everything we see and don’t see.”

Everyone assumed he referred only to Camp Aleafin. If losing the camp were not such a clear and present danger they might have picked up on the fact that Swiz hinted that the treasure that Spyro had concealed was more than small gold; greater villains waited in the shadows than Pearlman. Losing the camp wasn’t the real danger Swiz was tasked with averting.

I asked, “We know where it is! Why wait? Let’s go get it!”