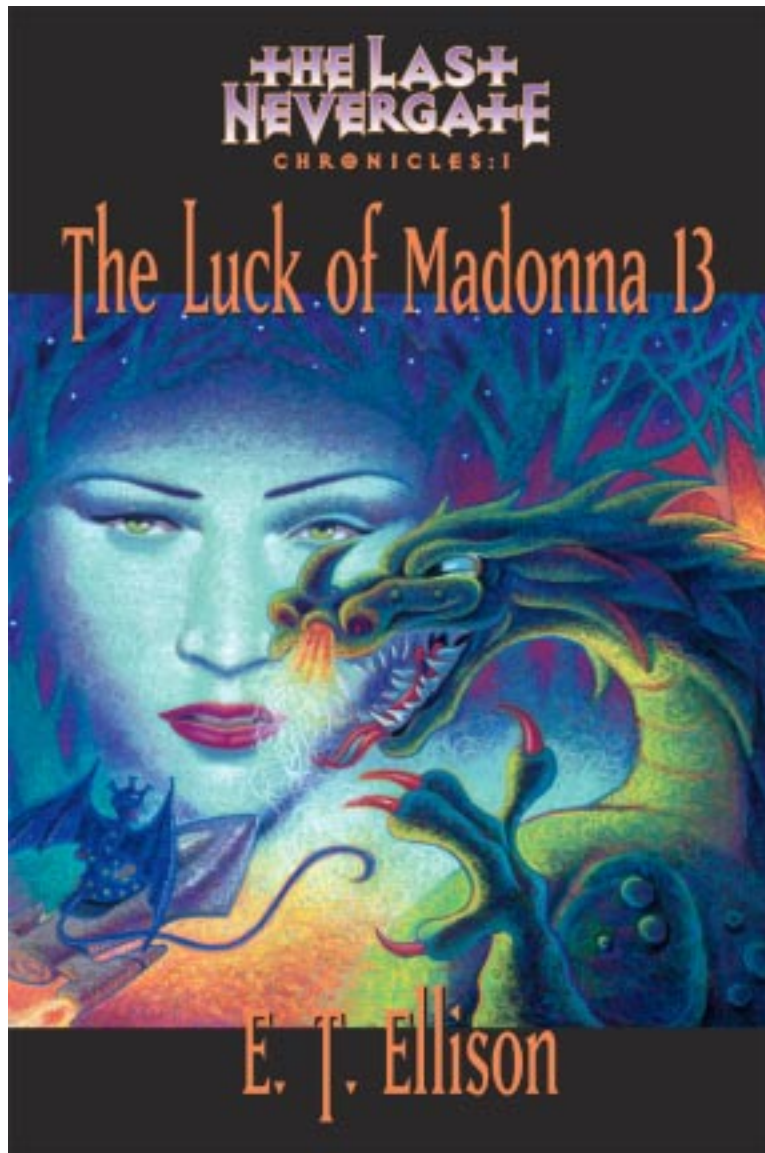


## A SAMPLER



### INTRODUCTION + CHAPTER ONE

In the real bookreading world, a reader with a full copy of *The Luck of Madonna 13* in his or her hands would have just completed the Genesis. This special section contains the complete text of Chapter 27 of Dr. Lavendra Cortioli's 2183 history of the IsoTown Movement, *Oddballs, Cults and Worldchangers*. Thus the reader would be properly backgrounded on St. Coriander, its origins and, to a lesser degree, its neighbors, the Clans Dunnigan, whose Nevergates and other marvels changed life on the planet Earth forever. While the Dunnigans and Nevergates are long gone and the depopulated Earth is a mere shadow of its former self, life in St. Coriander has been pretty much the same for 250 years. That's about to change...

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

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## IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT QUINCUNX ICONS



In the margins of *The Luck of Madonna 13* you will occasionally encounter an arrangement of five dots (in this sampler of Chapter One, you'll find one on page 52) like the one above. In the Genesis section that precedes Chapter One, you'll find six. This cryptic "sign of the quincunx" (pronounced "kwinkess" by most of us, including residents of St. Coriander) is your signal that additional information pertaining to the topic at hand may be found at **[www.lastnevergate.com](http://www.lastnevergate.com)**. This is the Chronicler's Site and it contains a growing collection of miscellaneous content of possible relevance to the time and place of The Last Nevergate...and of possible interest to you, the reader. Enjoy the sample...and the Chronicler's Site, too.

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**A DICE ROLL, A QUINCUNX  
AND A LUCKIEST**

Hair the color of dusty emeralds sprayed from under the silver-blue sheen of the prayer helmet. A supplicant wore the helmet. Fear swung in this supplicant's heart like a freshly hung corpse on a gallows; her thoughts danced to the burning rubber smell of looming fate. And Lucky Madonna remained mute as ever. Still, the supplicant sought some mystical signal of encouragement. And wondered: is there such a thing as being too lucky? Duh, rattled an answer from her surly repository of rhetorical answers to rhetorical questions.

The chapel was one of sixty-five identical prayer chambers to be found within the confines of St. Coriander's Holy Quincunx. An inquiring, sensitive nose might detect a quality of disuse, but this supplicant was preoccupied and a little unsure of herself. She had entreated the Lucky Madonna only rarely: once or twice before a particularly important bangerball game; once or twice before a particularly important date. If nothing else, the muted tinklings from the waterwall behind the statue calmed her roiling mind.

A vibration of the prayer helmet signaled that the supplicant's audience with the reflective Lucky Madonna was concluded. The supplicant raised herself up to a cross-legged sitting position, removed the prayer cap with two strong hands tipped by lustrous, close-cropped green fingernails, and set it carefully — almost reverently — into a depression in the soft green feltstone that formed the base of the larger-than-life figure of the idol.

In the watery, undulating light of the chapel, reflections played fast and loose with the shapely contours of the nude statue. Glendyl Fenderwell looked up, her eyes moving quickly away from the raised sword in the right arm and glancing hopefully toward the left hand which held out its customary offering: a handful of huge emeralds, cut and polished to the traditional emerald shape and glittering with a

dangerous taunt. Her eyes moved up to the familiar face, clearly modeled after Madonna 13. Was there a sign for her in the weirdly distorted reflections of her own figure? Once again she posed the simple question that had constituted, in essence, her prayer mantra: would Glendyl Fenderwell succeed where her 249 sixteen-year predecessors had failed? Would the luck of Madonna 13 ride with her on her Quest, unlike all the others?

Was that a conspiratorial wink? A supportive flicker of smile? An upper lip curled slightly in derision? Glendyl's more grounded self gave a rueful shake of head. Phantoms. Figments. Tricks of light. She rose to her feet, made the ritual "dice roll" gesture, turned and walked toward the door. Dirge-like strains of the traditional pipe organ rendition of "Only the Lucky" rose up from the floor like a slowly filling bathtub.

As the chapel door slid aside, a tiny clinking sound penetrated the monochrome undulations of the organ. The sound had seemed to come from behind her. Glendyl turned slowly, a cautious turn but laced with athletic grace. A ripple of unidentifiable strangeness coursed up her spine, her muscles tensing to readiness. Her eyes detected no movement, her ears detected nothing but the ponderous organ tones which overpowered the pale tinklings of the shimmering waterwall. Still, some other sense told her that something was not quite the same as a moment before. Seconds passed. Her eyes finally came to the rescue: an out-of-place glint. Something small and green glittered on the dull feltstone base of Lucky Madonna's altar, just to the right of the icon's shimmering left foot. One of the emeralds had incomprehensibly fallen from Lucky Madonna's immovable palm.

Glendyl hesitated, her face atwilt with conflicting emotions. Her wideset gray-green eyes flickered from side to side in counterrhythm to her nervous, darting tongue: a pointy red-pink instrument which was busily wetting the suddenly dry lips of a pleasantly wide mouth. She walked on guilty tiptoes back to the altar and, hesitating only a moment, picked up the fallen jewel and transferred it to her own open palm, a flesh mirror image of the Lucky Madonna's palm. The emerald

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felt warm, almost hot. She frowned and decided to put it back where it belonged: was this some kind of worthiness test? Before she could act on her decision, the emerald split open like a faceted green clamshell. Something else was revealed: a tiny green capsule.

Green-tipped fingers, seemingly acting on their own volition, grasped the capsule and popped it into her mouth, whereupon the emerald halves snapped back together and the jewel was once again whole. Glendyl's throat, evidently a co-conspirator with her fingers, swallowed the green capsule. Then the emerald was back amongst its green fellows in Lucky Madonna's palm. Glendyl palmed the chargeplate set into the frame and was quickly out the chapel door, winding her way up the stairway from Sublevel One and ultimately emerging into the Grand Arcade, still alight with late night questioners seeking the assistance of the hundred one-armed Oracles which dotted the area. Glendyl threaded her way past glassy-eyed patrons, nodding here and there to a familiar face and trying to ignore the rows of symbols coming to rest in the Oracles' answerpanels; then through the southeast tube under the Moat to ultimately emerge into a crisp late spring evening. Strangely, she later remembered nothing of the capsule incident in the chapel.

The walk through St. Coriander's Central Park was without incident and ten minutes later Glendyl was opening the front door of her family's well-kept ranch-style home on Turtledove Way in East Village. She tiptoed through the foyer, down the hall and into her room, just barely noticing the banner that hung across the hall saying "We're with you, Glenny! All the way!" Within the safety and comfort of her own bedroom, she considered whether or not to consult Septriq for a reading of the portents; she was Luckiest, after all, and the portals might show a hopeful sign. But sheer exhaustion tinged with the fear of an unlucky interpretation won out and her slate remained dark that night. And though she was, in effect, about to be banished into the unknown and would doubtless never earn a proper Elevation, she was asleep as soon as her head hit the puffwad, thinking sweet-sour thoughts about tomorrow's setting-off party.



In his spacious but sparsely furnished office high in the Centrisk — the central obelisk of the Holy Quincunx — Father-Mayor Gullwimple busied himself with legal necessities and other preparations for this year's Quest. He was tall and large-boned, and his width overflowed the chair, which supported him under silent protest. A shame we have to always give up our Luckiest to the mountain, never to be seen again, he thought with little force of conviction. Thick eyebrows on a pink face flexed in an almost comical parody of a frown, fighting for facial dominance with a pencil moustache (he regularly watched Wayne Newton 5 vids) as his mind followed the subject matter to its inevitable ending point. Slightly out-of-pitch strains of *Danke Schoen* wobbled through the office.

His annual review of the Luckiest Situation (as he annually chose to think of these brief ruminations) always ended with an acknowledgment of the obvious: luck, even the singular luck of a Luckiest, was of little use. In St. Coriander, luck did not bring wealth, long life, victory over obstacles or any of its other traditional outcomes. And it had certainly not helped any of the 249 previous Questers survive their Quests and win their objectives. Ah well: no help for it. At this point in his musings, Father Gullwimple typically abandoned the topic and continued with the formalities.

Occasionally, there was a supplementary consideration of a more personal nature. In the present case it was to admit that he was less concerned with the loss of one more Luckiest sixteen-year-old than with the loss of a lively little tart like Glendyl Fenderwell. Far better to send off boys to wherever in the Counterindicated Zone they met their dooms. Father Gullwimple had always liked athletic females, part of the reason he had, over his long lifetime, been in regular attendance at St. Coriander bangerball games. Being Chief of the Fatherhood, while repetitive and boring in many ways, also had its privileges. And after all, such pulchritudinous resources should not, in good conscience, be wasted. Once they Elevated, their charms were lost to him — and to this Earthly plane — forever.

## I ~ A DICE ROLL, A QUINCUNX AND A LUCKIEST



May 30, the day required by the New Rules to be set aside for the annual selection of the Luckiest, was a lively, all day occasion. At the end, one sixteenner would be named Luckiest, the person best suited to seek on Mt. Funnybone for the Key to the fabled Nevergate. The new Quester Designate would be presented with his or her only prize: a fresh-from-the fabrax, sealed QPack.<sup>1</sup> After 249 failed Quests from which no Quester had ever returned and presumably no Key to the Nevergate found, the good folk of St. Coriander had resigned themselves to things pretty much remaining as they had been. This was not at all bad, if one didn't mind spending one's life confined within the comfortable, easy prison that St. Coriander had become. So rather than a rite of renewed hope, the activities of Luckiest Day had become little more than a gameshow rerun and an excuse for a party. Of course most of St. Coriander viewed the proceedings from their own homes or at the holodome at the Amphi in Central Park: only sixteenners and staff were allowed in the Holy Quincunx for this particular event.

Jonas Mapplethorpe qualified as staff for this event. He sat high above the floor of the Sanctuary in the many-faceted gilt Music Box, which protruded from the south wall like a golden carbuncle. Due to the pending advent of his forty-eighth year and mandatory Elevation, this would be his final performance; he truly outdid himself on the day which Glendyl Fenderwell earned the Luckiest distinction. In addition to rendering the traditional musical themes for various segments of the event from early morning to the final Grand Quincunx pulloff, Mapplethorpe had fashioned a set of entertaining augmentations; sound effects ranging from celebratory artenskops, through all the acknowl-

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1 A single, sealed QPack has appeared mysteriously in the output chamber of St. Coriander's venerable Central Fabrax at exactly 12:01 a.m. on May 30th of each of the last 250 years. It can only be opened by the Quester Designate. A message to this effect is displayed in pulsing blue letters on the surface of the transparent membrane enclosing the newborn QPack. Exactly what a QPack contains is known only to the Quester Designate. Several curious, possibly larceny-minded citizens (including one member of the Fatherhood), died particularly ugly and dramatic deaths attempting to breach the membrane before its lethality became accepted without question.

edged strata of cacophonous accentules, even including a number which were shockingly (to some ears, at least) similar to masterful exercises of flatulence, belching and a form of wretchedness known as the dry heaves. These effects were used to distinguish particularly unlucky efforts by the participating sixteeners.

Harriet Cheevie, music columnist for the *St. Coriander Times*, and only a few years from Elevation herself, rated Mapplethorpe's final effort with only two and one-half trumpets (out of five), principally for its "remarkable — almost Wagnerian — exhibition of bombastic excess (setting aside its unfettered tastelessness altogether) which indelibly marred an otherwise artful day in the Box." The sixteeners, however, loved it to a one.

Mapplethorpe was not the only artist to reach beyond the norm on this occasion. Reveta Bunsaver, the acknowledged *enfant terrible* of St. Coriander's fledgling neo-Illusionist colony that had coalesced a few years back in the Majester Arts District, also made a majestic smudge on the occasion's record books. Her magic-assisted decorative efforts, while perhaps overspare to some traditionalists, were leavened with entertaining effects, including puffs of localized aromatic green gas that seemed to be perfectly timed to certain of Mapplethorpe's grosser sonic projections. And the Dance of the Bloody Symbols — a well-choreographed sky-troupe of magical, two-meter, white-furred rabbit's feet, apparently still dripping blood from fresh severings — soared to new heights in tastelessness, although not without redeeming social commentary and hilarious antics. Altogether, Glendyl Fenderwell's Luckiest Day was one of the more original on record.

Glendyl's winning string at the bones, the jackspinner, the heavyhandle and the Grand Quincunx pulloff itself, while not the recordbreaking skein that Jennet Wanketil had racked up nearly a century ago, was the best overall since Fhargis Shah's string a decade prior. Perhaps more remarkable was the fact that Glendyl's previous exhibitions of luck had been few and far between. While she had earned some prowess on the bangerball court by dint of talent and diligent practice, only her detractors attributed her athletic prowess to luck.

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But talent and luck, at least in the experience of St. Coriander, were rarely distributed to any great degree in the same individual.

Altogether, this year's Luckiest Day had been a fine celebration: the 250th Luckiest was declared; all the other sixteeners of St. Coriander could breathe a sigh of relief; the community was roundly entertained; the mad sorcerer Exeter's whims were satisfied at the expense of only one human soul. Finally, Glendyl's semblance would be added to the Holarium, a display hall in Sublevel Three in which all the mostly forgotten Luckiests could be seen. And her name would, in all likelihood, be added to the Quest Memorial at Dunnigans Gate.

Few residents of St. Coriander, however, ever paid tribute to these lost youths, either by visiting the Holarium or by approaching the vicinity of Dunnigans Gate. The only public acknowledgment was the traditional Heroes Honorific which led off the Luckiest Day events. Deprived of the opportunity for Planar Elevation at age forty-eight, the Luckiests bore a never-discussed stigma. Best to quietly forget, rather than trouble one's soul over bygones. Or so went the thinking in most quarters of St. Coriander. Forrbank Pitley and his Colloquium for Opening Minds in St. Coriander (COMISC) were attempting to change that, although he and the group had made little apparent progress. Pitley would doubtless go to his Elevation before he could redirect the cultural and intellectual momentum of the venerable Iso-Town of St. Coriander.



The day of Glendyl's Quest broke open like an egg; first a crack, then a splat. The crack was a bolt of lightning that seemed to have borrowed the sky for the entire morning, it hung so long in her vision. The splat was just the first of a thousand raindrops the size of golf balls plopping against Glendyl's bedroom window. Great weather to start a deathwalk, she thought resolutely.

Glendyl sat up in bed, grabbed her slate off the nightstand and coaxed the sleep out of her eyes with a practiced fingernail. What might

the portents have to say this morning? she wondered. With that she began her customary first activity of the day: a Septriq<sup>2</sup> consultation. She expected little encouragement on this particular day, but habit was habit. The seven portals pulsed a portentous red, the standard idle display for chance mode. Glendyl's thumb went to the spectral to establish her colors for this turn. The seven pie-shaped portals each flicked through the seven colors in random sequence until the counter reached 777.

The colors in the portals were now sequenced clockwise from lightest (yellow) to darkest (black), with black resting in *sepatriq*. An unusual lay. And the lightless, dead black in *sepatriq*: the muse had already signaled two powers, color and position. Rare, but not bad for a day like today. Still, the pattern seemed auspicious: yellow, orange, red, maroon, green, blue, black. Glendyl could not recall the book's interpretation and hesitated to inquire; a wriggly feeling in her stomach suggested it might be better not to know. A little more awake now, she continued. Seven spins to go. Thumbing the tot-wheel representation on her slate with her customary flourish, the two seven-sided die spun with vigor. One was a blur of color; the other a blur of numerals. The blurs became perceptible as color and numbers and the muted clicking slowed, stopped: seven and black were revealed. The yellow slice in *o* disappeared, along with the *o* itself, replaced by black and another *sepatriq* nomenclator. Glendyl's heart lurched against her ribcage. She swallowed and gave the tot-wheel another vigorous spin. Seven and black again. Glendyl made a face. Black now occupied three portals. A few moments later she was staring at a domat pierced by seven lightless

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2 Septriq is still widely consulted as an oracle in St. Coriander, particularly by females, who "play" using only chance mode. An ancient slatetext called *The Secret Oracle* is the standard guide to interpretation. Males rarely use Septriq, but when so inclined are typically more attracted to its fast paced action modes and deeply hidden "secrets," which may or may not be more myth and rumor than fact.

The core nomenclature of Septriq is as follows: the *domat* is the dome form that is visible during "standard" play. Seven triangular portals or windows are cut into the domat at equal intervals. Each portal has a unique name. Clockwise from the seven o'clock position, the portals are *o*, *do*, *tre*, *quat*, *quint*, *sextim* and *sepatriq*. See pages 25-26 and [www.lastnevergate.com](http://www.lastnevergate.com) for more.

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black windows, each tagged with a septriq notation. A highly improbable outcome.

Glendyl frowned, unable to draw any specific meaning from the sequence, but aware that something nearly impossible had just occurred. Then, on its own accord, the slate's image began to change: the black-ported dome dissolved in a hypnotic whirlpool of interlaced colored spirals, somehow drawing her awareness down into it: deeper, deeper. A powerful un-sound penetrated some part of her auditory nerve-channel; vision wavered and her entire body shook as if afflicted by a deep chill. Glendyl's awareness went elsewhere, to be called back some time later by a knock on her bedroom door.

"Glenny-honey. Time to get up. Your friends will be here in an hour." Glendyl's mother, Polisandra Fenderwell. Her brittle cheeriness was an ice dagger that pierced Glendyl's thin veil of sleep but left no evidence. She shook her head and rolled out of bed, glancing at the slate's empty face.

Before she could get into the shower, there was another interruption: her QPack began pulsing alternating red and green lights. As she approached it, a perfect replica of her mother's voice spoke from inside: "Pack me, Glenny-honey. And don't forget extra underwear. And don't forget to read my directions first. Big day, today, Glenny-honey." Then it snickered and was silent.

Just what I need, thought Glendyl: a smartass pack. She was tempted to kick it, but restrained herself and ignored the voice. It would probably retaliate somehow. And why piss it off? Maybe she should just pile dirty clothes on it; would that piss it off too?

A short time later she had packed and showered away every last trace of the green dye she had worn for her late-night pleading to Lucky Madonna, then dressed for the sendoff brunch her parents had hastily assembled for her and a small group of friends. As she pulled on her favorite casual black sheath, she began to think about what she was supposed to be seeking on the Quest: the Last Nevergate. Somewhere in the vicinity of Mt. Funnybone [Mt. Faunibeune, in proper geographic nomenclature] was the last remaining Nevergate. Or so went

the tale. Once there had been thousands of Nevergates<sup>3</sup> and the folk of Earth engaged in commerce with strange folk in strange lands on strange planets in strange universes. Then it all collapsed, the Nevergates disappeared and a depopulated planet shrunk in upon itself like a sun-dried tomato.

If she remembered her history correctly, some ancient madman named Exeter closed St. Coriander off from the rest of the planet and made the town send out some poor “lucky” sixteen-year-old every year, to try to find the last Nevergate, whatever it might look like and wherever it might be. And if they found the Nevergate, that was no good all by itself, because they would also have to find the Key that opens it. And supposedly, according to somebody or other, the Key and the Nevergate are up around Mt. Funnybone somewhere, which no living person in St. Coriander has ever seen, thanks to Exeter. Find the Nevergate and bring the Key back to St. Coriander. Then something else would happen and old Castle Ommergard would rise again. Hardly possible, thought Glendyl’s rational mind: the huge fanciful thing is still sitting down below Kissever Ridge outside the Township Fence, empty and dead as St. Orwell’s ribcage.<sup>4</sup> She’d seen it herself. How could a thing like that ever fly? It was all a fool’s Quest: some “honor” for the luckiest sixteen-year-old in town, she thought blackly.

Thinking about the futility of the Quest brought tears to Glendyl’s eyes and wracking sobs to her lithe frame. All she was going to get out of this was having her name engraved on the Quest Memorial at Dunnigans Gate and her image added to the Holarium: more lucky failures for people to forget. Before her frustration and despair could run its course there was a knock on her door.

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3 Nevergates were a mechanism which made possible travel between a virtually infinite number of parallax universes. The so-called “Nevergate Era” brought humanity more wonders than it could handle. Although the first Nevergate was invented at Dunnetix, almost literally in St. Coriander’s backyard, this masterfully self-absorbed IsoTown appears to have been impervious to the stresses and strains the Nevergate Era wreaked on the rest of the planet.

4 The founder of St. Coriander, Merritt Frank Orwell, was accorded sainthood by the Holy Quincunx Church in 2077. See page 15 for more.

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“Glenny-honey...are you ready yet? Your friends are starting to arrive.” Her mother’s voice was now soft, but laced with an odd quality of disappointment: gaining a Hero meant also losing both a popular daughter and at least one future grandchild to this Quest nonsense. A sad thing. In fact, she had even been considering a tripoli (Elective Early Elevation) because of the shame of it all. If this be luck, luck is a black thing, not green.

Glendyl half-expected the QPack to say something snide, but it remained silent. By the time she had skillfully disguised or eliminated all evidence of tears, finished primping and arrived in the living room, her seven best friends were already busy sharing their views.

“It’s just a big pile of bullshit rock!” exclaimed Cynthia Paddington, who, like everyone else in St. Coriander, had no idea what Mt. Faunibebene actually looked like. Cynthia brimmed with the heat of impassioned ignorance: her specialty. “Who cares?”

“Yeah, really: who wants to fall off some bullshit rocks and get all messed up?” remarked Sable Hawthorne smoothly while spattering glitterines on top of thick blue eyeshadow with her new All Purpose BeautyWand.

“I’d be starving all the way,” said the one called Glisten while stuffing three, fresh-from-the-MenuMaster chocolate bonbons into her mouth with a pudgy, ring-swaddled white hand.

“The Key is pure mythological nonsense,” proclaimed the tall and erudite Nancie Phipps in her usual know-it-all tone. “Forrbank Pitley’s ideas make much more sense. But personally, I think the Primal Dragon invented and propagated the whole Key myth as a way to satisfy its craving for toothsome sixteeners. You’re just going to be ravaged and eaten by a smelly dragon, Glendyl Fenderwell. Just like that sad story about little Doremi in the Exeter Incident. Mark my words!”

A low murmur of assent ping-ponged the room before Marybeth Drumhillier’s shrill whine cut through. “How am I going to get through Eastac if you climb up there and get eaten by a dragon...or even just a bear?” With still a year of Eastac to go, Marybeth’s round eyes glittered with real tears. “You know I can’t make it without you, Glendilly,” she

pleaded. "Come back so you can help me next term. Promise?"

Only two of Glendyl's seven closest friends made no attempt (however knowingly futile) to dissuade her. Margaret Atchison was so in awe of Glendyl that the concept of questioning her had never crossed her mind. She just gawked in cow-eyed amazement, thinking that this was probably the most memorable moment in her life and might just keep that hallowed status forever, for all she could imagine. Oh wow, she thought. Oh wow.

Lizbeth Marble was silent for another reason. Tall, gangly, homely, brainy and quirkily unpredictable, Lizbeth was almost always silent. Except for her periodic outbursts, that is. These occasions of volcanic expostulation had earned Lizbeth her reputation as a person who spoke her mind...or even all three of them. Lizbeth found herself in tight-lipped grief: Father Gullwimple would soon be here with the Liability Papers and that would be that. Glendyl, that sweet shining star of St. Coriander, would be lost to them all forever. Worse, Lizbeth would lose her only real friend, a personal catastrophe of incalculable proportions. Lizbeth wanted to say something, but all her words refused to budge from her larynx like a herd of balky mules.

In due course, a repast was set out and sporadically eaten: the eight girls then retired to Glendyl's bedroom for "private time." Later, a gentle knock on the door brought the chatter to a sudden halt.

The door opened just wide enough for Mrs. Fenderwell's pink and yellow beehive hairdo to pop through. "Okay girls! Time to break up the party: Father Gullwimple is here." She smiled a weak-but-brave smile and quietly closed the door so they could complete their good-byes in private.

In the living room shortly thereafter, Father Gullwimple dusted off his standard Quester speech and delivered it with a surprising degree of animation. Then it was time for the legalities: the Liability Papers were brought forth, already marked with a red "X" where Glendyl was supposed to sign, a green "X" where her mother was to sign and a blue "X" where her father was to sign. He handed each signatory a writer of the proper color and witnessed the affixing of their signa-

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tures, with occasional surreptitious glances in Glendyl's direction. Glendyl didn't notice.

Consolations and conversations dwindled, papers were signed, copies distributed to the signatories and an original tucked back inside his voluminous parson's frock. His round-featured face now the very image of solemnity, Father Gullwimple removed a sealed envelope from somewhere else within the black garment and discreetly handed it to Glendyl's father. It was a Bereavement Voucher, redeemable for two thousand fabrax credits at the Holy Quincunx Business Office should Glendyl fail to return to St. Coriander with the Key after three months. Formalities were complete: Father G donned a ceremonial smile, said his final words of encouragement to Glendyl, muttered the customary prayer to Lucky Madonna and departed for the Gate on one of the Fatherhood's small fleet of heavy-duty mopeds.

Remnants of the morning's masses of thick gray cumulus had scuttled across to the western sky; overhead and east was clear, bright and auspicious. After a flurry of last-minute forgettings and rememberings, Glendyl, her parents and her seven best friends had boarded the complimentary community carriage always provided free of charge to the Quester and his or her farewell entourage. This conveyance made its way at a stately pace along St. Orwell Loop and Outbound Road to ultimately arrive at Dunnigans Gate on the northern perimeter of St. Coriander lands. When the carriage arrived at 11:54, Father Gullwimple was pacing impatiently before the gate, grouching under his breath about the tardiness that seemed an endemic and unchangeable bad habit of St. Coriander's laity.

The magnificent arched portal was the only known access point between St. Coriander and the outside world. Still, it was so rarely used that it seemed superfluous to most residents. In fact, Dunnigans Gate officially opened only once each year. The gate stood thirty feet wide and the same dimension at its apex. Its outward-swinging doors were artfully fashioned of heavy timbers which appeared sound and sturdy despite their great age. Bound in black metal, each half of the gate was faced with an airy, ornate half-circle pattern also wrought in

black metal. Together, the halves formed the circular design that all residents of St. Coriander knew to be the venerable mark of the Clans Dunnigan: a starburst wrapped around an arrangement of geometric devices.<sup>5</sup> Framing the Gate were two massive square columns of stonemasonry, their mortared blocks darkened by weather and encrusted with multicolored lichens and mosses which softened their terse shapes. From them rose an archway of stonework that managed to look graceful despite its great mass. To either side of this imposing structure extended the Township Fence: the high, tangled hedge of menacing, impenetrable thornmesh which enclosed the entire township perimeter.

Dunnigans Gate was situated just beyond — and hidden by — the rarely-visited rock outcrop known as “The Wartles.” Beyond Dunnigans Gate was Heroes Trail: this much was known. Where it led, exactly, was only conjecture, although when the gate was open, a rectangular waysign could be seen. It was by now quite familiar to Father Gullwimple, who had for many decades been charged with the duty of opening Dunnigans Gate once each year on May 31st. The waysign said simply: “Humbecker Ford 1.8 miles.” Nothing more. Curiously, the sign was always freshly painted; white letters on a blue field. Along the bottom, in very small letters if anyone troubled to read them, were the words “Waysign provided courtesy of Exeter’s Mt. Faunibeune Services.” Perhaps, thought Father Gullwimple, it was a gentle reminder that Exeter was still a force to be reckoned with and that he had not forgotten St. Coriander over the years. Of course few in St. Coriander ever saw the sign, since only Luckiests ever passed through the gate.

Amid much waving, tears and brave talk, Father Gullwimple keyed

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5 For readers curious as to why St. Coriander’s single portal to the outside world would be called Dunnigans Gate and bear the Dunnigan clanmark, the short answer is simple. Since the late twenty-first century, St. Coriander has been surrounded by lands of Clans Dunnigan ownership known in their totality as the Dunnigan Reserve. Thus Dunnigans Gate is less a portal *out of* St. Coriander Township than it is a portal *into* Dunnigan territories. However, in the centuries since the Dunnigan Retreat, the lands have suffered virtually no Dunnigan stewardship and have reverted to unmanaged wilderness.

## I ~ A DICE ROLL, A QUINCUNX AND A LUCKIEST

the gate with his lockpatch, temporarily disabling the gate's lethal security devices and triggering hidden actuators. Mirror-twin doors swung smoothly and silently outward to reveal an unremarkable, well-tended path of packed red earth bordered on both sides by the tall mass of clotted trees that was the Deadly Forest. Her pack firmly in place, Glendyl squared her shoulders, inhaled what she knew was to be her last breath of St. Coriander air and passed through. Father Gullwimple made the customary gesture of good fortune; the assembled witnesses waved solemnly at Glendyl's receding back, a variety of thoughts coursing through their heads.

As her mother's final caution to watch out for sailbirds faded from her ears like a forgotten sunset, the twin doors of the gate swung shut, the lock reactivated and Glendyl was lost from view.

Father Gullwimple bade Glendyl's small entourage farewell, mounted his moped and pedaled eastward along a little used trail that would take him to the Fatherhood's private Revelation Retreat where he would prepare for the traditional Quest Benediction to be conducted at sunset. The carriage quietly whirred its silent passengers back down Outbound Road.

The time was just past noon. The morning storm had left the trail dotted with random pockets of ruddy water, but the sky remained clear and the late May sun gave the midday air a sweet, languid quality. Fair weather notwithstanding, a sense of dark dread had settled over Glendyl's normal effervescence like a shroud of impermeable black gauze: if she really was the Luckiest, now would be a good time for some of this luck to manifest itself.

Somewhere inside her body, a tiny green capsule had dissolved into a myriad of invisible genetocules, all busily attending to tasks which had been designed for them nearly three centuries earlier.

Some distance behind her, Dunnigans Gate swung silently open for the second time that day. A figure passed through. The gate closed.