



## CHAPTER

# HIDDEN GEMS

Bonnie looked down at the magma far below. As the slow-moving river boiled, heat rose from the depths and warmed her skin, a refreshing change from the chilly air that normally filled the tunnels and chambers in the nether regions of Hades. If she stayed here much longer, she would have to take her sweatshirt off. Her long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans would be enough to keep her warm.

While small whirlpools spun in slow rotations, huge gas bubbles erupted on the surface and popped, spewing ash and steam upward in swirling clouds of sulfur-permeated air. The entire stream churned from right to left, at half the speed of a normal walking pace.

Standing between Sapphira and Shiloh on the rocky ledge, Bonnie unfurled her wings and rested a tip on each girl's shoulder, ready to pull them back should they lose their balance. Shiloh, Bonnie's nearly identical cousin, matched her height, but Bonnie had to reach down a few inches to cover Sapphira, the



petite Oracle of Fire. Both companions wore matching outfits, sweatshirts and jeans, perfectly suitable for exploring the sometimes narrow caves. Shiloh also wore a ring with a red rubellite, making her ready to pretend to be Bonnie, just in case.

“I don’t understand how it could ever have been harmless,” Bonnie said as she fanned her face with her hand. “It’s scalding even way up here.”

“Oh, it’s deadly now.” Sapphira picked up a fist-sized stone and tossed it into the chasm. The moment it struck the current, a plume of steam shot from the contact point, sending reddish black fragments high into the air. “When most of the portals closed a long time ago, it turned into normal molten rock.”

“Normal?” Taking a step back, Shiloh blew a strand of dampened hair from her face, her British accent as pronounced as ever. “As if anything’s normal in this place.”

“You’re sweating,” Bonnie said. “What are you wearing underneath?”

Shiloh lifted her sweatshirt, revealing a T-shirt with a lion on the front. “It’s the Narnia shirt you gave me in the sixth circle. It’s too warm for two layers and too cold for just one.”

Bonnie shielded her eyes from the river’s glow and scanned the other side of the chasm. Rising heat warped her view, making the rocks on the opposite wall hard to define. As undulating light from the restless source below created strange shadows all across the sheer rock face, one shadow seemed constant, a protruding lip of stone. “What’s over there?” she asked, pointing. “I think I see another ledge.”

Sapphira pulled back her stark white hair and tied it with a rubber band. “There *is* a ledge. When there was a portal nearby, my eyesight was sharper, and I spotted a tunnel opening on the other side. Even now I sense something, as if a weak or distant portal is around, but I don’t know where it could be. Anyway, I never figured out how to get across the chasm to check it out.”



Flipping Sapphira's ponytail with the tip of her wing, Bonnie grinned. "Now we have a way to get there."

"I wouldn't try it," Shiloh said. "The updrafts from that crazy pot of stone soup could toss you around like a feather in a storm."

Bonnie let her wings droop. "I guess it'll have to stay a mystery." She looked again at the opposite ledge. Shadows continued to stalk its surface, so real they seemed alive. But, of course, they were the result of the odd light, nothing to worry about. With Yereq guarding the only entrance to the mines, no one could intrude on them.

"Speaking of mysteries ..." Sapphira turned toward an opening in the wall behind them. "The only place left to show you is the kiln level, where Elam used to make magnetite bricks with Raphah. I've never even been there myself."

"Why not?" Shiloh asked. "If you were here for centuries, you had plenty of time."

"It was a forbidden zone for years and years, and after everyone left, Chazaq wasn't around to lower the platform in our elevator shaft. It's a long drop, much farther than what we climbed to get to this level, so if I went down there, I thought I might never get back up. And now the rope's not even long enough to go that far. When Bonnie's fully healed, maybe we can give it a try. She might be able to boost us with her wings."

Bonnie nodded. It had been about a month since her mother left with Acacia through a portal to Second Eden. They had used a section of the elevator rope Sapphira had cut to climb through the cross-dimensional hole. Bonnie and Shiloh had also tried to climb, but the portal collapsed, and rocks fell through, sealing the hole and injuring Bonnie's shoulder. Fortunately, as an anthrozil, the photoreceptors in her blood helped her heal quickly, though not as quickly as she would have healed in the sunlight.

Sapphira lifted her hand and whispered, "Give me light." A blaze erupted in her palm, a small fireball, bluish white and



sparkling. “Ready for the climb back up? I think it’s only about a half hour until Gabriel’s supposed to come.”

“About twenty-five minutes,” Shiloh said, looking at her watch. “We can make it, if Bonnie’s up for the climb.”

Bonnie rubbed her shoulder. “It feels good, but I could use another dip in the hot springs after Gabriel leaves.”

Sapphira touched a pouch that had been sewn to her jeans waistband, perfectly sized to hold Enoch’s ovulum, a crystalline egg at least five times the size of a hen’s egg. “Let’s go. I left the ovulum in our hovel. I’m kind of nervous about being without it.”

As Sapphira led the way toward the tunnel, Bonnie followed, looking back as she walked. The fireball cast an azure glow across the chasm, though not enough to see the other side clearly. As the light shrank away from the expanse, a strange shadow took shape, growing larger by the second.

Bonnie turned and spread her wings. “Sapphira! Shiloh! Run!”

As the two looked back, Bonnie grabbed each of them around the waist and lifted off the ground. Beating her wings, she scooted through the exit passageway and into the tunnel. The moment she lowered them to the floor, Sapphira jerked free. She stepped back toward the passage, spread out her arms, and shouted, “Ignite!”

Her body burst into flames from head to toe, her hands ablaze in white hot tongues that shot three feet in front of her. “Who’s there?” she called, her voice deeper than usual.

In the light of Sapphira’s flames, the shadow vanished. A human male walked through the exit, his hands raised to block the heat. “Hey, Sapphira! Cool your jets!”

Bonnie laughed. “It’s Gabriel!”

“In the flesh.” Dressed in a long-sleeved flannel shirt and khaki cargo pants, he nudged Bonnie’s side. “Your wings look awesome. Did you never lose them, or did you get them back?”

“I’m not supposed to tell. I’m not even sure you’re supposed to know I have them.”



“Oh, well,” Gabriel said, shrugging. “Cat’s out of the bag ... or the backpack, I guess.”

Sapphira lowered her hands and let the flames dwindle to a fireball in one palm. “How did you get here without us seeing you?”

Gabriel pointed toward the chasm. “I flew across that crazy lava river. Quite a ride, that’s for sure.”

“I lived here for multiple millennia,” Sapphira said, “and I never found a passage to that side.”

“Leave it to me to get lost looking for you.” Grinning, he gave her a wink. “Actually, there’s a way to get there from the lowest level. It’s kind of a steep climb, though.”

Shiloh elbowed his ribs. “Okay, mystery boy, spill the story. How did you get to the lowest level?”

He walked back toward the ledge. “Come on. I’ll fly you over there one at a time, and we’ll talk. Yereq’s there, too, and a few other surprises you’ll have to see to believe.”

“Yereq’s there?” Sapphira said as she and the others followed. “Who’s guarding the entrance?”

“Walter’s dad.” Stopping close to the edge, Gabriel looked into the depths. “You should see him. He looks pretty cool with an assault rifle, and Walter’s mom is there, too. She had a pump-action shotgun. Anyway, since we couldn’t find you in the hovel or the springs, Yereq hung a new rope in the elevator shaft and lowered us to the bottom. He’s stronger than a gorilla and climbs like one, too. I told the others to wait while I checked out the tunnel that led up here.”

Bonnie reached over with a wing and tapped his shoulder. “How about if I carry Sapphira and you carry Shiloh?”

“Sure.” Gabriel shrugged. “If they’re not queasy about a rough ride.”

Shiloh raised her arms. “Lock and load, Batman. I’m ready for anything.”



As Gabriel wrapped his arms around Shiloh, Sapphira copied her pose. “Bonnie, are you sure you can carry me?”

“That’s why I picked you.” Bonnie slid her hands around Sapphira’s slim waist and pressed her chest against her back. “You’re the lightest one here. I once carried Billy from our schoolyard all the way to the top of a mountain. He probably weighs almost twice as much.”

Gabriel pointed a wing at Bonnie. “I learned this the hard way. The heat will push you higher, so keep your webbing at an angle, almost like you’re descending, and you can glide most of the way across. Maybe three wing beats will do it.”

“Got it.”

Gripping Shiloh tightly, he flapped his wings and lifted toward the chasm. Almost instantly, a rush of air thrust him higher, but he quickly corrected and glided away.

“Last one there has to kiss Morgan,” Shiloh sang out.

Bonnie followed, keeping her wings tilted forward. At first, she dropped, raising a gasp from Sapphira, but when she adjusted to catch more of the rising air, she ascended toward the opposite ledge, flapping slowly to compensate for the inconsistent surges from below. The heat dried her eyes and cheeks, delivering a painful sting, and her wings felt weak, having had so little exercise in the caverns of Hades.

Boosted by a final thrust of rising air, Bonnie flew over the wall’s protruding lip and released Sapphira, who jogged to a graceful stop. Bonnie flapped again to keep her balance and managed not to stumble.

Gabriel extended an arm toward a low-clearance hole in the wall. “Follow me, ladies.” He ducked under the arch and disappeared, Shiloh staying one step behind him.

“They’ll need light.” Sapphira created another fireball and hurried through the opening.



As soon as the glow faded, Bonnie took another draw from the sulfur-rich air. If only Billy could see this place. He'd be amazed. But he was probably seeing even more amazing things himself, going on adventures in Second Eden she could only dream about. Of course, being with him would be awesome beyond words, but staying here for now would have to do. After all, that's what God wanted. Nothing else mattered.

"Aren't you coming?" Gabriel called, his head sticking out through the hole.

"Sorry. I got lost in thought." Collapsing her wings and ducking low, she hustled under the arch and followed Gabriel as he walked, hunched-over, toward a light in the distance.

"Don't stand straight yet," he said. "The ceiling's pretty low for a while."

Keeping her eyes on Gabriel's wings, Bonnie scrambled along the pebbly floor until they reached Sapphira. The petite Oracle stood without bending, while Shiloh and Gabriel remained stooped. "Now you see why Yereq didn't follow me." He pointed into the darkness. "Sapphira, if you please. There aren't any hazards between here and there."

Sapphira marched ahead, her fireball now brighter than ever. Shiloh kept two steps behind, while Gabriel took Bonnie's elbow, slowing her pace as they followed. "Are you doing okay?" he whispered.

"My shoulder's healed, if that's what you mean."

"That, too, but I was wondering about staying down here. Sapphira's used to it, and Shiloh stayed alone for forty years, so she can handle it."

Bonnie smiled. Images of Gabriel's past appearances ran through her mind. When she was only six years old, he appeared to her in the form of radiant energy, and she thought he was an angel. "My guardian angel is a wonderful, caring young man."



“Young? Do you know how old I really am?”

“Sixty, maybe?”

Gabriel laughed under his breath. “Older, but nice try.”

“And how old is Shiloh?” Bonnie asked. “Fifty-five?”

“Something like that.”

“Hmmm ...” Bonnie pressed her lips together, trying to hide a grin. “Close enough, I think.”

“Close enough?” Gabriel squinted at her. “What are you suggesting?”

“Suggesting?” Bonnie tried to read his eyes, but shadows blocked her view. “What were *you* thinking?”

“Never mind.”

This time, Bonnie let her smile break through. Everyone knew of Gabriel’s attachment to Shiloh, but he was too embarrassed to admit it.

Finally, the ceiling angled up, allowing her to stand upright. The tunnel widened into a well-lit chamber, a square room about thirty feet across. Freestanding ovens lined each of three walls. Their chimneys rose toward holes in the ten-foot ceiling, though they came short by various distances. Their crumbling tops, likely penetrating the ceiling holes at one time, revealed their age and lack of recent use.

Flickering lanterns sat on the floor. A person crouched or stood near each one, most of them women, except for Yereq and an old man wearing sandals and a forest-green medieval tunic that overlapped dark knee-length breeches.

Bonnie eyed the elderly gentleman. With a bright white aura surrounding him, he seemed ghostly, even semitransparent. For a moment, he would be solid, then a shimmer would pass across his body, allowing a split-second view of the rock wall behind him. With scattered white hair covering his ears and bright sparkling eyes, he seemed familiar. In a way, he resembled Professor Hamilton, her former teacher who passed away after a battle with Devin





the dragon slayer. Yet, since she missed him so much, every lively old gentleman brought back thoughts of her beloved professor, though they didn't really look alike.

Bonnie followed a trail of light from his aura to one of the women. She carried the ovulum in her cupped hands. Like a movie projector, it seemed to create the aura and the man within.

Gabriel gestured toward each person in turn. "Bonnie, Shiloh, and Sapphira, I would like to introduce you to Rebekah, formerly Legossi; Dallas, the woman holding the ovulum, was once Firedda; Elise, also known as Carboni; Dorian, who once flew the skies as Yellinia; Kaylee, who, when dressed in scales, answered to the name of Alithia; Jordan, known to the dragon clan as Martinesse; and Tamara, affectionately dubbed Sorentine by her fire-breathing family members."

He took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. "Whew! I practiced that for hours."

"Excellent!" The elderly man clapped his hands. "And I am Enoch, prophet of the Most High. And of course," he said, motioning to a giant man sitting near a corner, "you already know Yereq."

Gabriel let his wings sag. "Sorry. I was going to introduce you next."

"It's quite all right. Sapphira and Shiloh already know me." Enoch reached for Bonnie's hand, but his fingers passed right through hers. "And Bonnie saw me from the window of her motel room."

"I *thought* I recognized you," she said. "It was dark that night, so I didn't get a good look."

"Nor I at you. And although we can now see that you have wings, you and everyone here must guard that secret. A day may come when we can use the ignorance of others to our advantage. And plans for the future are why I arranged this meeting. I am in my viewing room at Heaven's Altar where I can see almost anything



I request, and I can project my image if the Lord so allows. The ovulum is very useful as my hologram-generating device.”

Sapphira laid a hand on her empty pouch. “How did the ovulum get here? I left it in my hovel.”

Gabriel pointed at himself. “I found it there. When I picked it up, it started talking. Scared me half to death.”

“I apologize for the scare.” Enoch began pacing in a small circle near the center of the room, glancing at each person as he made the circuit. “The people in the land of Second Eden are preparing for a great battle, and they are woefully unprepared. They have only recently had to take up arms to ward off infrequent attacks from small bands of shadow people, who are relatively weak compared to the forces that will someday come against them. The enemy will eventually include the entire race of shadow people as well as another tribe of humanlike creatures that has no name, as far as I know. A cadre of Nephilim will join them, and one of the mightiest of all dragons, Goliath, will surely enhance their power and strategic maneuvers.”

Tamara, a slender brunette who now sat cross-legged near a kiln, hissed, then quickly covered her mouth. “I ... I am sorry. Old ... um ... habit.”

Bonnie smiled at her. Obviously some of the former dragons didn't speak English very well. Wearing a long dress and smock, and her hair tied in pigtails, Tamara looked like an overgrown child, complete with a cute smile and dimples.

Enoch waved his hand. “Some habits die hard, and some we must retrieve and again make our own. Each one of you dragons, for one reason or another, has chosen to take part in the human race. Yet now I am asking you to return to your draconic states and join the battle in Second Eden, at least as many of you as possible.”

A low rumble sounded from somewhere above, making the ground tremble. Enoch looked up, his bushy white eyebrows scrunching down. “Yereq, will you please investigate?”



When Yereq climbed to his feet, his head rose to within inches of the ceiling. He bowed to the prophet. "Shall I take a messenger who will send word in case I become involved in a battle?"

Just as Gabriel raised his hand, Rebekah shot to her feet, her waist-length blond tresses swaying as she rose. "Send me. The winged boy will be of greater use here if escape is necessary."

Enoch nodded at her. "Then make haste. We will fill you in on the details later."

Rebekah stripped off a zippered jacket, revealing a long-sleeved baseball-style jersey tucked into loose-fitting camo pants. She jerked up a lantern and swung toward Yereq, fire in her eyes. "Let's make tracks!"

As soon as the giant and former dragon disappeared into another tunnel, Enoch continued, his pace of delivery much faster now. "You cannot transform into dragons until you arrive in Second Eden, and the available portals are dangerous, so we must get you there by way of a new kind of transport. Marilyn Bannister, the human wife of Clefspeare, is building a device called Apollo that will, in combination with Sapphira's power, create an entirely new portal opening."

Sapphira raised her hand. "Father Enoch?"

"Yes, my child." His tone seemed patient, but his eyes kept glancing at the ceiling. Even though he wasn't actually in the chamber, somehow he could perceive direction of sound.

"What about the portal in the museum room? I sense that it's still there, but when I try to reopen it, I see that the passage is blocked by rocks."

"The portal is still there. Apparently, someone has again plugged the hole at the top of Mount Elijah, so the inhabitants of Second Eden must break through in order for us to use it again. I have no way of knowing why they have not done so, because my viewing portal to that world was limited to the ovulum. Even I cannot travel there at this time."



Forming her hands into a cradle, Sapphira took the ovulum from Dallas. Enoch's projection drifted with the egg's movements. "Maybe we should try to get this to Second Eden. It would be more useful in their hands than in mine."

Another rumble sounded, louder this time, followed by a stronger tremor. Bonnie and Gabriel flapped their wings to steady themselves, while Enoch stood upright, unaffected.

When everything settled, Enoch scanned the chamber's inhabitants. "I heard the quake, and by your reactions, I assume the tremor was powerful."

"Yes, Prophet," Gabriel said. "A real shaker."

Enoch sat down. As his body hovered just above the stone floor, he stroked his chin. "This is quite unexpected. I have no idea what is causing the seismic disturbances."

Sapphira stood next to him, her head only inches higher than his. "Shall I try to go to the surface?"

"Alone?" Gabriel asked. "Without a weapon?"

Enoch chuckled. "Sapphira Adi, the Oracle of Fire, *is* a weapon."

Sapphira blushed. "Then shall I go?"

"No, child. We will await word from Rebekah. Let us rest and have faith."

She sat down and crossed her legs. "I have several questions, if you don't mind."

"Then ask." Enoch glanced again at the ceiling, listening. "My meeting agenda is on hold until we learn what is afoot."

Sapphira began counting on her fingers. "When will the Apollo device be finished? Does this mean Bonnie and Shiloh and I don't have to stay here? And ..." Her cheeks flushed a deep cherry red. "Will I get to see Elam soon?"

Enoch patted her hand, though, again, he made no real contact. "I am a prophet, dear one, but I do not have all the answers. Regarding Apollo, without Ashley there to help, Marilyn has only



Larry to guide her, so I cannot guess when it will be finished. I arranged for helpers to come to her aid, but it remains to be seen how much benefit they will be. So, while I evaluate the dangers on the surface, you will stay here, at least until we test Apollo. The purpose of this meeting was to gather all the former dragons in a safe place and inform you of our plans.”

“That makes sense.” Sapphira bit her lip before continuing. “And what about Elam?”

“Ah, yes, my old friend, Elam.” Enoch gazed at her, pausing for a moment as a faraway look passed across his eyes. “It is difficult to know how God will bring people together, or if he will at all, so I cannot answer. I hope the two of you will be united at last, but I think divinely arranged marriages are relatively rare.”

“Like Billy and Bonnie?” Gabriel asked.

Enoch smiled at Bonnie before shifting to Gabriel. “Merlin’s prophecy seems to indicate an eventual union between two people of similar characteristics, but they are not named. And the poem also does not reveal when, where, or how it will take place.”

“But isn’t Bonnie closely related to Billy?” Gabriel asked, scratching his head. “Something like second cousins or first cousins once removed? I can never figure that out.”

Enoch laughed gently. “They are related through their dragon lineage, and God’s laws allow for unions between closer dragon relations than they do for human ones. Billy and Bonnie, however, are quite safely within the limits for both species.” He pointed at Gabriel. “On the other hand, take for example you and Shiloh. Although she is your niece, which would disqualify a union between the two of you in the code for humans, since that relationship is of draconic origin, you could be married.”

Gabriel’s cheeks turned even redder than Sapphira’s had. “Yeah,” he said, running his shoe along the floor. “I get it.”

Bonnie sneaked a glance at Shiloh. Her face, too, had flushed, and a barely perceptible smile bent her lips.



Dallas stood up. "I hear footsteps."

Rapid clops sounded from the tunnel. Seconds later, Rebekah burst into the chamber, her lantern swinging. Breathless, she bent over and laid a hand on her chest. "Explosions. . . . Men with jackhammers . . . Two with guns."

With a beat of his wings, Gabriel glided to her side. "How about Mr. Foley? Is he okay?"

After taking a deep breath, Rebekah straightened and shook her head. "He's wounded, as is his wife. Yereq put them in a safe place before he began fighting the invaders."

"Did Yereq collapse the entrance tunnel?" Sapphira asked. "That was our plan in case of attack."

"He said he was going to, but I left before he could do it."

"We gotta get up there," Gabriel said. "With my wings helping, I can climb that rope in a heartbeat."

Sapphira leaped to her feet. "I'll go. I'm the lightest. Gabriel can use the rope to pull me from the upper level, and I can help with hauling up the others."

"Count me in," Bonnie said, raising her hand.

As Shiloh and the former dragons chimed in with their calls offering to help, Enoch waved his arms. "Come together! Hurry!" When they gathered around, so close they penetrated his aura, he spoke with a solemn tone. "Do not act in haste. You are the reason the invaders have come. If you pop out of your hole, they will pick you off. Go in stealth, and proceed with caution."

"Understood." Gabriel picked up a lantern. "Follow me!" He exited through the tunnel, the glow of his lantern bobbing with his quick march.

Sapphira gave the ovulum to Bonnie. "You stay at the back of the line and use this for light." Carrying a ball of fire in her hand, Sapphira hurried to follow Gabriel. Shiloh went next, then Rebekah and the other former dragons, some carrying lanterns. When the last one filed out, Bonnie looked at Enoch. With only



two weak lanterns on the floor, the glow from the prophet's hologram seemed brighter than ever.

"I have to catch up," she said, "but something's been bothering me." She touched the side of her waist, as if gripping a belt. "It feels like something's tied to me, but when I try to grab it, I can't feel anything. Even when I take off my clothes to bathe in the springs, I think it's still there."

Enoch leaned close. "I cannot try to feel it for you. Have you asked Sapphira?"

"She can't feel it or see it. Neither can Shiloh."

"Hmmm..." His eyes brightened, as if energized by his drilling stare. "I have an idea about what this might be, and it could be of grave concern, but while I ponder it, you should hurry and join the others." The hologram faded along with the aura. "I hope to see you again soon."

Bonnie picked up one of the lanterns, blew out the other, and rushed into the tunnel. Ahead, light appeared. As it grew brighter and closer, a voice sounded in the distance. "Bonnie, is that you?"

"Yes, Shiloh." Flapping her wings to give herself a push, Bonnie scooted toward her. "Thank you for waiting."

"No problem." Shiloh's eyes sparkled as she winked. "I figured we'd better make like twins before we showed our faces."

Bonnie nodded. It was time to get their backpacks on, just in case.



