

PROLOGUE

Rachel hated boys. There was no doubt in anybody's mind about this and she made it absolutely clear that she wanted nothing to do with them. "Show me a boy in my year or even the year above me that I can't beat in any subject or outrun or even outfight and I'll show you a girl! Boys are stupid, clumsy and irritating. Even the most stupid girl in my class is cleverer than any of the boys! Boys are utterly pointless." Then the silent boy with impossibly blue eyes arrived at her school and everything turned really odd!

Rachel loved her dad to bits despite him being male. But even he was not as clever as she was when it came to playing Labyrinth. Well not now that she was nearly ten anyway.

The embers of the fire were spluttering out as Rachel put the last tile in place and moved her piece into its final square. She loved this game Labyrinth and the way that each turn changed the landscape on the board entirely. "Five games to nil, Dad, are you letting me win?"

Her father looked at her quizzically. Should they have told her of what was to come? He had asked himself the question over and over again. The answer was always the same, no. "Why do we play games, Rachel?" he asked.

“We’ve done this one, Dad, ‘to have fun and not just to win!”

Her father sat back in his chair. “Why do young animals play?”

Rachel thought for a while. “To learn survival skills, obviously, Dad. Although how boys learn anything is a mystery!”

Her father smiled. “It’s late. Time for your bed, young lady! School tomorrow!”

Rachel yawned. “I know. Try harder next time, Daddy, I need more of a challenge.”

Her Father raised one eyebrow. “Cheeky mare! Go on, skiddadle!”

Rachel headed out of the lounge. “Night, Dad.”

She found her mother doing the family accounts in the kitchen. “Goodnight, Mum.”

Her mother looked up from the papers arranged in neat piles around the table. “Did you win again?”

Rachel smiled “Naturally! Good night.”

She headed upstairs as her father went into the kitchen. Rachel’s mother looked up from the paperwork once more. “She won again?”

Her father frowned. “Yes! And I was really trying hard that time!”

Her mother asked, “Is she ready, do you think?”

Her father frowned again. “Yes, I think so. I hope so!” He sat down.

“Best we call Brian then,” her Mother said, putting down the papers and sighing. “I’ll get the bugle horn then, should

I?” Her father nodded and Rachel’s mother went to the cupboard under the stairs. When she came back into the kitchen she asked, “Do you want to do it or shall I?”

Rachel’s father gestured for her mother to do it.

She lifted the horn to her lips and blew. No noise came from the instrument. Then she sat down and sighed. “It’s done. We just have to hope now.”

A long, long way away, in a far distant meadow under a different sun of different sky, a Kobaloi pricked up his furry ears and grinned. “Play game now!” he said and then scuttled off through the grass chortling.

CHAPTER 1

Rachel 'The Intrepid' had a bucket. She knew that other children preferred toys to play with like princess castles (girls, obviously) and Buzz Lightyear (boys, obviously) and all manner of other silly stuff. She knew one boy who had a snake and another who had whole collection of exotic snail shells. A girl who had a real rocket set and another who had an adventure castle that sang songs and had moving turrets. Some who had iPad's and some who had very expensive electronic stuff, but Rachel had a bucket and that was better than any toy.

Rachel didn't know where the bucket came from but she remembered the first time that she used it. Properly used it!

It was a Monday four years before in the summer. It had been raining and it was the day before her first day at school. She should have started school on the Monday but, much to the joy of the parents, the school had begun term with a non-pupil day. Rachel had been a bit nervous about starting school but excited too. So she was a bit sad at not being able to start on the same day as children at other schools were

and that morning her parents seemed a bit grumpy for no particular reason.

Her dad had been moaning about them having six weeks off already (whoever 'them' were?) and her mum was complaining about not being able to start her new job that day. Nobody seemed happy that day. It was a glum day. Rachel decided to explore the garden again. They had a small garden that had one big bush in the middle, two trees (that never flowered) and a garden shed. It also had grass but Daddy said that it was mostly moss and needed digging up. Rachel decided that today she would explore the shed. The shed was a bit dark and gloomy with spider's webs and dirty tools but she was, after all, Rachel the Intrepid and wasn't scared of anything (much).

When Rachel opened the shed door all was pretty much the same as it had always been. Dark, gloomy and webby! She went inside and looked around at the rusty tools and wished that Mummy and Daddy were not so grouchy today. She had sat down on what Daddy called the potting bench, looked up, sighed, and swung her legs back and forth. As she looked up she noticed a metal bucket on a shelf that she had not noticed before. It caught her eye because one side of it was very shiny and one part very dull and dirty. It was quite small. Half the size of a normal bucket in fact.

Standing on the very much unused lawnmower gave her just enough height to pull the bucket off the shelf and catch it as it fell. She turned it around in her hands and thought to herself, 'You could do with a good clean on this side to make you shiny all over. Then maybe Daddy would see you

and be a bit happier.’ So she took an old rag out of a drawer and began to clean the bucket. It seemed a bit fancy for a bucket, a bit ornate. As she cleaned it she let her mind wander, as one does, and began thinking about what she would prefer to be doing. At the age of five she her thoughts naturally turned to the impossible and fantastical. *Unicorns*, she thought, *right now I would love to be playing with unicorns*. She had seen a unicorn on the school gates when she went to have her first visit to the school and had asked her dad about them. “Mythical beasts!” he said. “That means they don’t really exist. But they are supposed to bring good luck to whosoever sees one. Apparently, they like apples.”

It wasn’t long before she noticed that under the grime on one side was a hole and on the other was a sort of glass jewel. It couldn’t be a proper jewel of course. Just one of those glass things that some people decorated ordinary objects with to make them seem more special. Nonetheless, she cleaned and buffed it and took great pleasure in seeing it begin to sparkle through the dusty light. When it was as clean as she thought that she could get it, she put down the rag and took a closer look. She noticed that the sort of jewel thingy seemed to be loose so she tried to press it back into place but as she did so she heard a click. The bucket made a purring noise and began to vibrate. Rachel nearly dropped it out of fright but she was too intrigued to see what would happen next, if anything.

What did happen next was what made the bucket hers. A sort of wispy smoke started coming out of the bottom of

the bucket, swirled in a most un-smoke like way and wafted round in a circle on the top of the bucket. Rachel was fascinated. After laying it gently on the floor of the shed it happened. In the smoke there appeared to form five galloping unicorns. Within a few seconds they all stopped galloping. They just stood in the smoke beside the bucket looking at her. She put her hand into the smoke. One by one the unicorns jumped onto and off of her hand. Each one whinnied as it pranced on her palm. Rachel's eyes were wide in amazement. Their hoofs felt like cool dancing raindrops in a summer rain. When the last unicorn left her hand it joined the others and swirled into a line at the front of the bucket. All five unicorns reared up, when they came to the ground, one by one, put a foreleg out and bowed their heads. The smoke swirled again and seemed to get sucked back into the bucket. The jewel 'clicked' out again.



Rachel did something that she had never done before. She smiled and cried at the same time. When she realised this, she smiled and cried even more. It was wonderful! She just sat for a while thinking about what had just happened. Was it real?

“Lunchtime!” she heard her father call from the back door. She carefully put the bucket back, taking extra care to hide the jewel side of it and then covered it in an old rag. When she went back inside she asked her father, “You don’t really use the old shed, do you, Daddy? Can I have it as my den please?”

Her father looked at her mother and said, “Yes? Yes, I think you can. Remember Minotaurs are ticklish. You can use it as a study room when you start getting homework.” As a five-year-old, Rachel had not really understood the last two bits of that sentence but was happy to have her own den.

Now Rachel was four years older (nearly five years in fact!) and had ‘visited’ the bucket every time she could from then until now. She always thought that it would be wrong to tell anyone about the bucket because even she knew that she was still regarded as a child. Someone would have taken it from her for some ‘adult’ reason, so she kept it as her own secret.

Each time she pressed the jewel she would see an image of the thing that she was thinking of most and every time was a delight and a wonder. She would think of elephants and elephants would appear. She would think of flocks of birds and they would appear, strangely they looked a bit

metal. Once she tried to imagine what alien penguins would look like. Just for fun of course. Sure as buckets are buckets, alien penguins appeared. They had antenna on their heads and magnifying goggles and floated on skateboard sort of things. Instead of wings they had arms and hands. One of them spoke to her and said that this was all very interesting as they had often wondered what a human child looked like because they had only ever seen a couple of such specimens before. They commented on how difficult it must be to get around on such long wobbly legs without a floater to stand on. Who would want a singing adventure castle or a collection of exotic snail shells when you could meet alien penguins?

The other wonderful thing about the bucket was that when she had a project in school about something like 'dinosaurs' or 'the Tudors' she would go to her bucket and it would show her things that were really useful. It taught her so much about the subject she thought of that the teachers at her school would look at her reports and wonder if she had a supercomputer at home. She seemed to them to know things that even they themselves didn't know about the subject and they were supposed to be the teachers! The alien penguins were very helpful with science projects. This bucket wasn't just incredibly helpful but it also felt a bit like a really good friend.

Right now though, as Rachel approached her tenth birthday, she found herself in a quandary. She had thought that everything in her life was perfect. She really enjoyed school and her after-school clubs. Mummy and Daddy were

often tired and grumpy and seemed to be too busy working to play with her as often as she would like. She often found them just staring into space as if they were thinking of something or someone else, but she still felt much loved.

She had lots of friends, even if some of them were a bit confusing, as other people often are, and most special of all, she had the secret bucket. But right now things had changed. New people had moved into the house next door and there was something odd about them. Something not right at all! There was a mum and a dad and a boy of her same age with amazingly blue eyes and a dog. It was not a nice dog. It barked a lot, especially very early in the morning. Even though the family had lived next door for over a month now, Rachel had never seen the adults leave the house, or the dog. The little boy, who had started at her school that term, was quiet. Not quiet as in a bit sullen or moody but quiet. Silent, in fact! He simply never spoke. You never heard him either. You could be doing anything, turn around and there he was. Just watching and smiling. It was a bit creepy. Unlike some of the other children that were a bit different at school, he didn't have a special teacher, which was odd. And even more odd than that was the fact that Rachel sort of liked him, even though he was a boy.

In the playground he seemed content enough to simply sit and watch other children playing, although she did have to help him out once, whatever his name was. That was another odd thing about him. He had been at the school for three weeks, he was in her class and she still couldn't

remember his name! Even the teachers called him ‘Thingy!’ He may have been odd but for some reason she warmed to him. He didn’t run around shouting all day and he sat in the classroom paying absolute attention to whatever the teacher was saying. For a boy that was very odd!

He had been standing in the playground watching the other children when some of the older boys surrounded him and started taunting him and pushing him. He didn’t smile then. It was mainly Robin McRacker. He was an older boy that lived in the house on the other side of the odd boy. He was a bully. Rachel didn’t like bullies and she certainly didn’t like Robin. She knew that Robin’s father had disappeared eight years ago but that was no excuse for being horrible. Every class in the school had one or two bullies, girls and boys, and she didn’t like them either.

She walked over and stood in front of the new boy. Robin the bully tried to push her out of the way but Rachel’s karate teacher had taught her a trick or two about bullies, so as Robin went to push her, she stepped sideways then stuck her leg between his. He fell over, landing squarely on his nose.

“Ow! You little cow. Right then!” He stood up with his nose squashed and bleeding then went to push Rachel again.

Rachel stood her ground this time and without taking her eyes from his shouted very loudly, “Robin McRacker has got a big poo in his pants and it’s really smelly!” All of the other children in the playground turned round and looked at Robin.

Robin turned bright red with embarrassment. "I have not!" he said uncertainly.

All the children started laughing and pointing at Robin.

"You'll regret this, you little toe rag!"

Rachel kept looking him in the eye and said, "Don't bully little children then. Next time I'll tell the teachers and you'll get another black mark!"

Robin wasn't going to try to push her again with everybody watching. He already had two black marks from the teachers. A third would see him on a week's detention. He felt tears coming to his eyes and walked off, trying to look brave but feeling like a bit of a twit.

Rachel turned to the strange silent boy, her and Robin's joint neighbour. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He said nothing. Just smiled and gave her a hug. Then he walked back into the school.

'That boy is just odd,' she thought to herself.

His parents were just as odd. They seemed to shout a lot in angry voices and bang around a lot in their house. She hadn't actually seen them but they sounded very gruff. Then there was the glow. You didn't notice it at first but after a while, if you stared hard enough, you could see a very faint green glow coming out of the chimney at night and a low humming. She did ask her father about it but he just said that it must be a reflection from something close by, a light from somewhere making an 'optical illusion' and had then said, "Not everything you will see will be real."

She felt a little sorry for the boy. All in all, Rachel found her new neighbours to be, well, just odd.