

A CROWD-SORCERY STORY

Fable Thatcher has a mysterious power of prophecy—whatever she writes comes true, unless she writes concerning herself. One evening, the wizard Khaos comes to the Moonlight Faire, searching for the girl who writes the future. Khaos battles Roderic, the wizard who raised the orphaned Fable. Before he dies, Roderic tells Fable to seek help at Hush Castle. There, in the library attended by the Silent Sisters, Fable barely survives the attack of a winged monster, a homunculus sent by Khaos to spy on her. Her life is saved by a girl wearing a cloak of blackbird feathers, Araceli Luminè, who lives in a loft under the library's highest dome.

Opening a trunk, Luminè shows Fable a book written in Ishantrian, the language of wizards and sorcerers. Luminè's father had died retrieving The Book of Shadows from Khaos, who'd stolen it from the Hall of the Flame of Knowledge. On its pages the writing regarding the future swirls like smoke, the shadows of what is to come not yet having definite shape. Only the One Prophecy appears clearly—words that Fable herself wrote four years before while in a kind of daydream, when the pen moved mysteriously by itself. The Prophecy foretells that Fable will descend the Secret Stair to the Cavern of Koth—the lair of Khaos—from which none have returned alive.

Luminè tells Fable that she knows the way to the Secret Stair. On the journey they hide from Khaos's riders and stow away on a caravan of pirates attempting to sneak into Corginard disguised as merchants. After spoiling the robbers' plan, Fable and Luminè enter the City of Spires. Fable writes another unconscious prophecy, a puzzling poem that tells them they will find the Secret Stair when the moon shines bright in Aruve, which Luminè says is the land of dreams. A boy, Jonah, helps them overcome Derek Nightshade, a sorcerer who would steal The Book of Shadows. In the small boat in which he collects metal scraps to sell, Jonah poles them along a canal to a market section of the city known as Aruve. There, as the rising sun casts a shaft of rosy light on the smiling face of a brass moon, they discover the entrance to the Secret Stair.

THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

PART SIX

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

FABLE THATCHER scrambled from Jonah's boat onto the dock. Araceli Luminè already stood beside her, hand on her sword's hilt. Above them, the crumbling remains of a stairway led up along the wall to the chin of the huge, ornamental full moon set within the bricks.

Fable studied the staircase. It was more of a ramp, many stones missing, its steps muddy shelves of toadstools and moss. "Not many people come this way."

"Of course not," said Luminè. "Whoever remembers there's a doorway here also knows where it leads."

"Khaos must not use it, either," said Fable.

Luminè hoisted her pack. "I think he has easier ways to come and go—magical ways."

Jonah leaned on his pole, his green eyes narrow. "We may not be able to open it." He sounded hopeful. Then he glanced at the pile of rusted metal he'd gathered. "I'll hide the boat. I can't leave this unguarded."

"You shouldn't come any farther," Fable told him.

Jonah sighed. "You shouldn't go, either. But if you are, I'm coming, too."

"We'll start looking for a way through," said Luminè, "while dawn's light is still touching it."

"I'll join you up there." Jonah pushed off from the dock. "Be careful."

Fable waved. "Thank you. You saved our lives, and you got us here."

Jonah shook his head, his pole cutting the water as the punt glided away. "It's nothing to thank me for."

People might have glimpsed the two girls crawling up the forgotten stair, but no one paid attention. Fable imagined that children in Aruve, seeing the brass moon, might clamber up to touch its chin or have a picnic beneath its gleaming face.

Luminè took the lead on hands and knees.

Mud squished under Fable. She doubted the dress would ever come clean. Then she laughed at herself. *It doesn't matter. I'll never do laundry again.* She almost put her hand down

on a gray toad that waddled aside. The earth smelled of slime and mold.

"Look!" Luminè pointed as she floundered onto the landing. They were right below the moon's chin, its grin stretching wide to both sides. Luminè hurried forward so eagerly that her knee slid off the landing's edge. She yelped and clawed at the ground. Lunging, Fable seized a double-handful of the girl's cloak. Clumps of mud tumbled away and splashed in the water far below.

The sun's ray had nearly left the giant disc. On the brass that had already faded to dullness, a glowing handprint remained,



as if a human hand had been dipped into magical paint and pressed there. But even as Fable noticed it, the handprint dimmed. As it winked out, Luminè flattened her hand against it. “It’s the door handle!” Luminè said. “It’s an *opklini*—a wall that opens at a touch!”

Nothing happened. The moon still grinned, but its face was dark.

Fable’s heart sank. *We’ve missed the moment.*

“No!” Luminè pushed hard against the moon. She backed away, thinking. Then she turned to where the sun still lit the rough wall beyond the moon’s edge. She drew her sword.

Fable’s eyes widened.

In the sunlight, the sword gleamed. Luminè turned the blade. A dazzling reflection from the sword danced on the wall. The girl used her blade like a mirror, guiding the light back to where the handprint had been.

Fable drew a breath.

The brilliant hand returned.

“Now!” Luminè cried.

Fable clapped her hand against the print. The brass was hard and warm. Light streamed between her fingers. With a *click*, a section of the moon’s chin swung inward—a hidden doorway. A dank draft wafted out, bringing the odor of decay.

A stairway descended between cave walls, just wide enough for Fable and Luminè to walk side-by-side.

The Secret Stair . . . The Cavern of Koth, from which none have returned alive. Khaos waited below. Death waited.

Luminè gripped Fable’s arm and nodded. Sword ready, the gray-eyed girl stepped across the threshold. Below, where the stairway faded from sight, blue mist curled, softly luminous.

Violent shivers ran through Fable. Her feet would not move.

Three steps down, Luminè paused and looked back.

Roderic would go forward. Fable stared into Luminè’s eyes. “You are my courage,” Luminè had once said to Fable. For Roderic—and for Luminè’s father—Fable knew she must finish this. Yet her legs felt like water.

Someone shouted behind her.

Jonah hurried up the ruined stairway, slipping and stumbling in the mud.

Fable’s joy at seeing him dissolved into sadness. There was one way to save his life, and she must do it now. She dodged inside and pushed the door closed. Jonah yelled—cut off by complete silence. The world was shut outside.

“Well done,” said Luminè. In the dim mistlight, she was searching her pack. She pulled out a tiny jar of beveled glass. Fable recognized it as an *ornami*, a container for a magic potion. She hadn’t known Luminè carried one.

“From your father?” Fable asked.

Luminè nodded. “He mixed common *thask*, for repairing shoes, with *drenira*—sunlight captured in powder—to make an ointment that gives light. But there’s another enchantment on it, too. He told me to use it in a dark place, and only when courage failed. Anyway, there won’t be another chance to use it.” She twisted out the stopper. Dipping her

fingers into the jar, she scooped out a dark glop that sparkled with flecks of gold. She smeared it onto Fable’s forehead and cheeks, spreading it over her whole face.

At once, Fable could see more clearly, as if somehow the sun were shining wherever she looked. “Now your turn,” she said, reaching for the *ornami*.

Luminè shook her head. “It’s empty. There was only enough for one.”

Fable grabbed her friend’s wrist. “You should have used it on yourself.”

“No. You’re the one who has a chance.” As the girl led onward, Fable thought that even with magical help, she would never match Luminè’s bravery.

The stair wound back and forth, descending through the creeping mist. The vapor was cold and wet as snow. Slowly, a hollow roaring grew louder, the rumble of flowing water. The walls ran farther and farther apart.

At last, they reached a level floor. Fable could see no walls or ceiling at all, only mist and darkness—and then, at the edge of sight, two rivers rushing in rock channels, one on either side. The girls padded over a smooth stone floor. A curtain of the mist parted, and Fable drew a wondering breath. The two rivers, just before they would have joined, shot straight into the air, disappearing into the shadows high above. Beyond them loomed a wall—and in it, the huge black mouth of a cavern.

“*Sabralune*,” muttered Luminè.

Fable glanced at her.

“It means waterfalls that flow upward,” Luminè said. “Sorcerers create them to flaunt

their power over nature. And look.” She held up her sword, and Fable saw a red gemstone in the hilt that glowed now with an inner light.

“What does that mean?” Fable asked.

“This ruby shines when it’s near an *ytopuai*—a place where evil dwells.” Luminè peered toward the cavern. “As if we had any doubt.”

Luminè met Fable’s gaze. Together they passed between the columns of water and into the jagged opening. Fable nearly choked on the foul air. This was the stench of rot she’d caught earlier. It arose from this cold pit beneath the earth.

The two entered a realm of rubble mounds and chasms, of stone draperies and mighty pillars. Light of many colors flickered from lanterns that drifted like clouds in the air—*Jironen* lamps, such as Roderic himself had sometimes used, though the ones here were large as bonfires.

Fable’s scalp prickled—for on every side, far and near, the servants of Khaos watched, the *Tukoths*, *serponens*, *doiyiks*, *slicers*, and countless things that had no names even in legend. They were of a thousand shapes—scaly, feathered, winged like bats. They clung to gigantic webs, coiled around columns, darted their tongues, blinked their fiery eyes, and wriggled in the cracks, all their attention upon the intruders.

Now Fable knew that the magical ointment was helping her, because Luminè stumbled, the horror a heavy weight on her. Still, with Fable’s arm supporting her, the girl advanced.

A stone stairway led the girls up onto a colossal stone with a flat top. At its far edge,

against a wall, stood a throne made of the bones of monsters. In the center of the wide space, a wooden table held a single sheet of parchment, an ink bottle, and a silver pen.

The words burned in Fable's mind: "*There I will write my final prophecy.*"

She felt a wave of terror like an airless, motionless wind. Trembling, Luminè groaned and slid to her knees, the feathered cloak spreading around her like a midnight pool.

Fable's face tingled, warm beneath the ointment. Somehow, she took another step forward.

From an archway beside the throne, Khaos appeared. He wore the same face as the man who'd come to Roderic's wagon, yet now his full majesty shone. Dark hair was slicked back from a face so handsome it might have been that of an angel—except for its cruelty. A black cloak whispered over the floor, and ebony adorned his blood-red robe. His crown was fashioned of bones, his feet bare like those of a wild beast.

"Child of prophecy," he said, "I knew you would come. Now you will help me."

Fable tried to shake her head, but it was more of a spasm. "No. You killed Roderic. You tried to kill me."

Khaos smiled. "You speak of my homunculus? It meant to capture you, not kill. As for your master, you had no further need of him. I am your master now."

He spread his arms in welcome, and Fable's feet moved by themselves, carrying her to the table. She clutched its edge, fighting the dizziness swirling in her head. The will

of Khaos circled her mind on dark paws. She struggled to resist.

With a gesture, Khaos summoned one of the Jironen lamps, and it hovered near her shoulder. She could hear its fire growling as it warmed her.

"Now," said Khaos, "take up the pen. I will tell you what to write."

Fable's hand moved, but she stopped it, making a fist.

The sorcerer laughed. "Do you think you can oppose me? I command legions of monsters. I am more powerful than Time. I am the darkness beneath mountains, between stars. Your life is the flame of a wick."

Luminè stood beside Fable now, swaying but on her feet, sword up. "Her father killed you, Khaos. She will kill you."

Fable stared at her friend. *My father—?*

Khaos laughed thunderously, his cloak whirling like storm as he turned and sat on the throne. "Yes. Brandal Thatcher killed my mortal form, and in the same moment I killed him. A brave man, but where is he now? It is fitting that his daughter brings me new life!" His gaze slid to Luminè. "I am glad you have come, too, little one. You have brought me back my book which your father stole."

Sweat glistened on Luminè's brow. It took all her strength to stand. Her sword sagged, its tip clanking against the floor.

Perspiration stung Fable's eyes, too. A droplet of it splashed onto the parchment on the tabletop. Her father . . . Khaos had murdered her father, just as he'd killed Luminè's

father. "You didn't tell me," Fable said, her voice a gasp.

"What good . . . would it . . . have done?" Luminè answered.

Khaos leaned forward. "What you set onto the paper will come true. Pick up the pen."

Fable could not stop her hand. It plucked the cold pen from its stand and dipped it into the ink. Head swimming, she put her other hand on the parchment to steady herself. Her fingertip touched the droplet of sweat that she'd dripped there. It had already hardened like wax, infused with the thask and drenira from her face. The flecks of sunlight gave her an idea—and a twinkle of hope.

"Light," she rasped. "More light. Can't . . . see."

At the will of Khaos, the lamp drifted closer. Fable turned toward its heat, squinting at the paper.

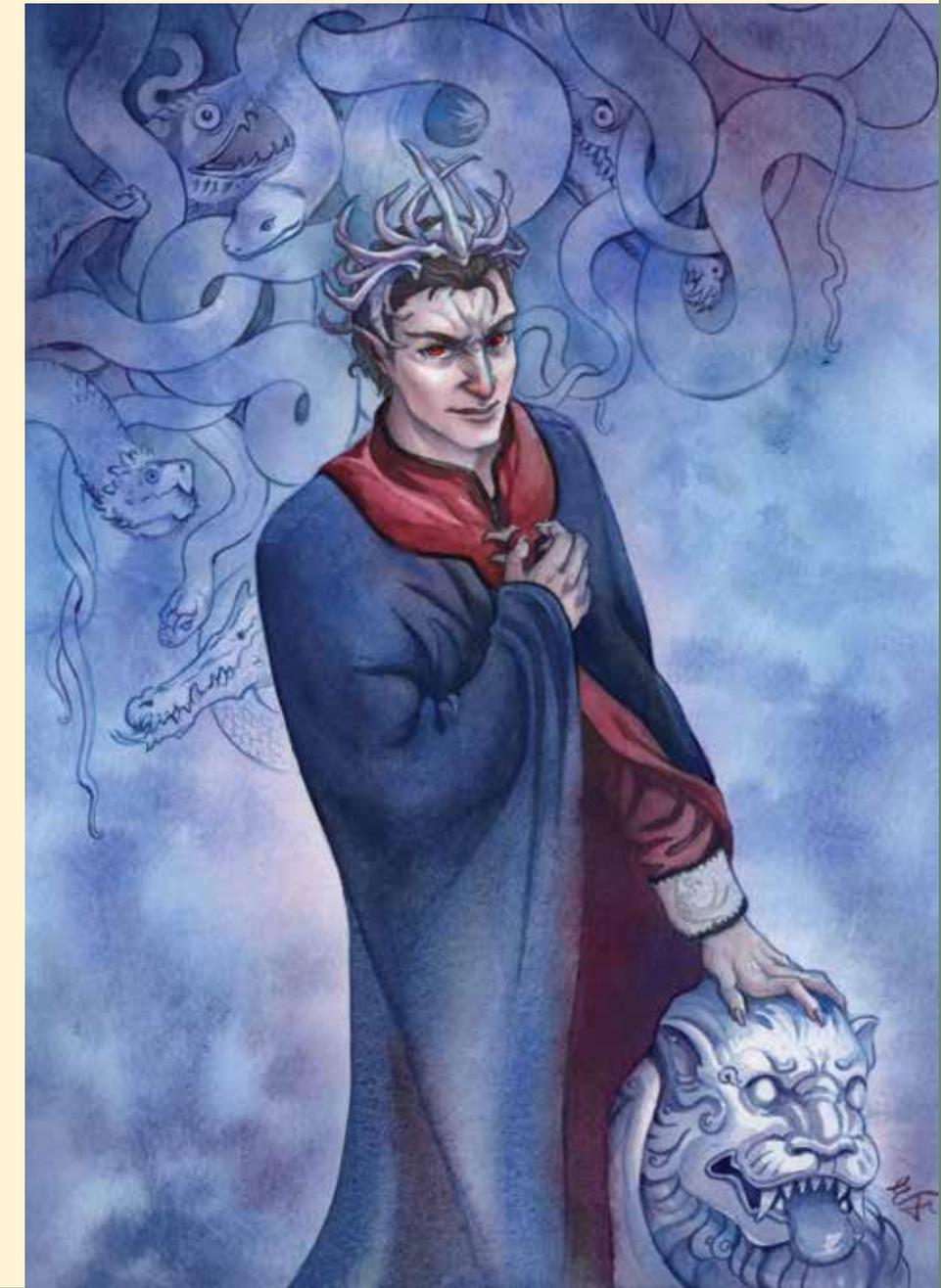
"Write this," Khaos ordered. "Immortal Khaos will never fall. He will bring to all the darkness of his reign, king now and forever."

Fable stayed her hand for as long as she could. Luminè wrapped an arm around her. The girl had nothing left to offer but her loyalty, yet it was enough.

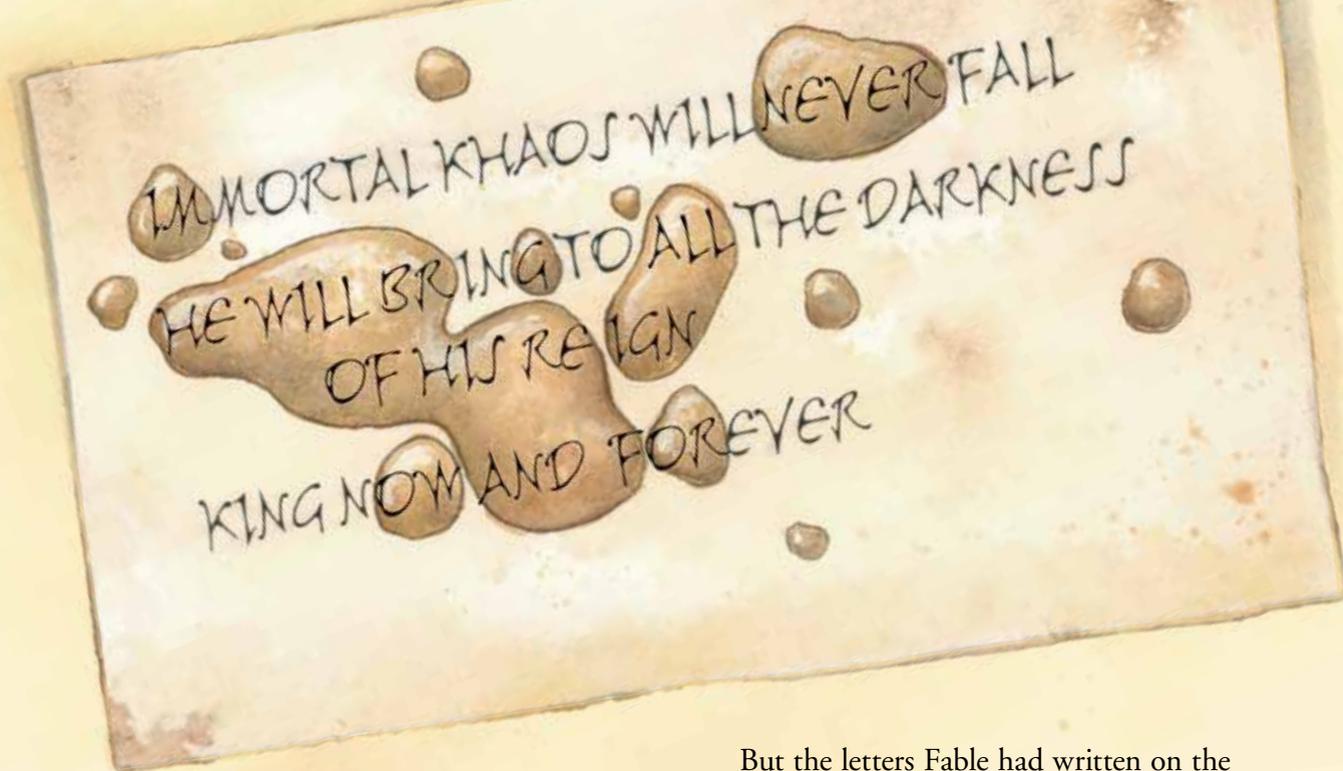
Now more of the ointment was dripping onto the paper.

"Write!" hissed Khaos.

The droplets dried and hardened swiftly. Fable prayed that her idea would work. *What I write on the paper will come true*, she told herself. *What I write on top of the droplets is only the shadow of a future that will not be.*



Khaos watched. If she began to write anything but what he demanded, he would stop her. Carefully placing some parts of the prophecy onto the drippings, this is what Fable wrote:



Luminè sighed, collapsing. She believed Khaos had won.

The sorcerer snarled in triumph, rising to his feet. All around the cavern, his servants gibbered and flapped.

“It’s done!” Fable announced, snatching up the parchment and holding it as close to the Jironen lamp as she dared. At once, in the fire’s heat, the dazzling drenira and common thask turned liquid again and streamed down the paper in runnels of shimmering gold-brown.

But the letters Fable had written on the paper remained, an irrevocable prophecy, the last she would ever write.

MORTAL KHAOS WILL FALL
INTO THE DARKNESS
KING NEVER

Khaos stretched his hungry hand toward the parchment, but he never grasped it. He screamed, a howl of rage and fear like the mightiest wind in the desert, empty of all but dust, touching nothing that lives, and finally heard by none.

His tall form became a fire that fed upon itself, rushing inward as if into a bottomless hole. Then there was nothing but acrid smoke. His crown of bones fell to the floor and shattered.

Khaos was gone forever. And the terrible Cavern of Koth—with all its slithering monsters—was gone as well, for it was only a pit rotted into shadow by the will of Khaos. Without him, it did not exist.

Fable and Luminè crouched together on the muddy landing atop the stairs in Aruve, before the giant brass moon. Jonah stood halfway up the steps, eyes wide in happy disbelief.

“You’re back!” he cried.

“We’re back,” said Fable, clasping Luminè’s hand. Fable felt different—lighter. “I think I’m out of prophecies.”

“Feels better, doesn’t it?”

Luminè grinned at her. “Your face is a mess.”

The Book of Shadows, once returned to its rightful place, would continue to fill, line by line, page by page, with the truth of the future as it slowly unfolded. From now on, Fable had only to write the present by living it.

She inhaled deeply, feeling the thrill of life. Then she and Luminè laughed, there



beneath the smiling moon in Aruve, the place of dreams. 🐛

A Crowd-Sorcery story featuring characters and fantasy words created on the Chatterbox by Cricket readers. Special thanks to Madeline T., Brooke E., and Katniss Everdeen for creating Fable Thatcher, Khaos, and Araceli Luminè, and to Will T., Benjamin F., Christie M., Zachary T., Quicksilver, Josie S., Lyra Telles, Ellie, and Katie M. for contributing fantasy words.