

THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

PART THREE

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

A CROWD-SORCERY STORY

Fable Thatcher has a mysterious power of prophecy. She travels with the Moonlight Faire, where she writes the future for those who visit the wagon of Roderic the Astonishing, wishing to have their dreams come true for the price of a gold piece.

One evening, the wizard Khaos comes searching for the girl who writes the future. He attacks Roderic, who shouts to Fable to hide in the Sarcophagus, a box sealed against harm. There, in the darkness, Fable writes the future—that Roderic will defeat his enemy and she will find him alive. When she emerges, Khaos is gone, but the entire Faire has burned. In the rubble, she discovers Roderic—alive, but barely—who tells her to seek the help of the Silent Sisters at Hush Castle.

Fable spends her days at Hush Castle in its vast library. But she feels that she is not alone, that someone is hiding, watching her. When she writes a prophecy to call forth the spy, a winged monster emerges. It is about to kill her when it is stabbed by a girl wearing a cloak of blackbird feathers. As a pool of the monster's blood turns to smoke, the girl, Luminè, explains that the creature, a homunculus, was sent by the wizard who had killed Roderic. Luminè leads Fable up flights of marble stairs to an alcove on the ninth floor. Behind a hidden doorway is a ladder, and Fable follows her new friend up toward the moonlight.

THEY EMERGED INTO

a wondrous space of silence and silver radiance under the library's highest dome. "Careful," Luminè advised, leading Fable along a balcony that curved, hugging the wall. Beyond the low balustrade, they could peer straight down, past the edges of eight balconies—ten stories of open space—into the library's central atrium. Far below, the furniture lay shattered where the homunculus had attacked. Wisps of the smoke from his smoldering blood had risen and now drifted against the ceiling in moon-kindled clouds.

The balcony led them to a loft—a shelf of planks that filled a triangular alcove in the dome's wall. Fable supposed it had been built for storage, but it was clearly where Luminè lived. Dozens of books lay in stacks among scrolls, a marble bust, two chests with heavy padlocks, and—back in the corner—a small bed with rumpled covers. A few mice skittered away at the girls' approach.

"I hope you don't walk in your sleep," Fable murmured, keeping away from the loft's front edge.



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Luminè lifted her cloak and twirled herself around, letting the cloak swirl, its feathers glistening. “Up here, it’s like being a bird,” she said. “I can see everything below.”

Fable supposed Luminè had a lot of privacy. Plaster had crumbled from the walls in patches, but the woodwork had been lovingly tooled long ago. In carvings on braces and crossbeams, faces gazed out from ornamental clusters of leaves. The moon blazed outside a large round window, the panes framed by four interlocked hoops of lead inside a larger circle.

“How long have you been here?” asked Fable.

Again, Luminè shrugged. “I don’t try to count time. I used to travel with my father. He collected books for the library. It was his life’s work.” She unbuckled the sword and leaned it against a beam.

“I thought you said he dealt with sorcerers and traveled to strange—”

“The best and rarest books are not easy to come by.”

“So the Sisters know you?” Fable said. “They let you stay here?”

Luminè nodded. “And borrow all the books I want.”

The two faced each other for a long moment. Fable saw that Luminè’s eyes were gray. “Well,” said Fable at last, “if what you say is true, we don’t have much time.”

“We don’t.” Luminè studied her. “I know who you are. My father said you would come one day—the girl who writes the future.

There are prophecies about you. They’re in many of the books.”

Fable stared. “How can you know about my prophecies?”

Luminè tipped her face. “Since you came here, I’ve been watching you—sometimes right over your shoulder. I’ve noticed the books you read and the things you write to yourself. You’re afraid. You want to be rid of your gift. It feels to you like a curse.”

Fable clenched her hands and looked away. “You’re a spy, too.”

“You came here, into my house. I had a right to observe. To survive, one has to watch and listen.” Luminè turned and crouched over one of the chests. Unlocking it with a key from her pocket, she said, “I know your sorcerer, too, if you’re the girl of the prophecies. He is an omnidriem, master of all magic arts—the only one who would search for you far and wide. He’s the worst and most powerful of all sorcerers. His name is Khaos.”

Khaos. Fable thought of the man in Roderic’s wagon, the one with the oiled hair. Khaos—he’d spoken his own name. He had not died in the battle with Roderic, though he’d left without finding her. Fable hugged her arms and shivered, feeling the press of darkness all around.

From the trunk Luminè drew a leather satchel, and from the satchel she took a thick book.

“What’s that?” Fable asked.

Luminè stepped out onto a wooden beam that extended from the loft to the

balcony. She sat with her feet and cloak dangling over the sheer drop. The moon bathed her in its glow.

“Why are you sitting there?” Fable’s voice quavered.

“It’s my favorite place. Besides, the light is best here. Come on, if you want to see this.”

Heart pounding, Fable crept onto the beam, not daring to look down. She settled next to Luminè and tried not to think of the empty air beneath her.

The book’s cover was embossed with a tree, its roots questing deep, its crown spread-

ing wide. Glancing over to see if she had Fable’s attention, Luminè flipped the cover open. The scent of ancient paper billowed out. On the title page were magic letters. Fable knew the language was Ishantrian, used for centuries by wizards and sorcerers. She’d seen it in books of Roderic’s, but she hadn’t studied it.

“Can you read it?” Luminè asked. “No? It says *The Book of Shadows*. But in Ishantrian, ‘shadows’ can also mean ‘the future’—that which is not yet in the light, not yet clearly seen.”



“Did your father teach you Ishantrian?” Fable felt a pang of sorrow and loneliness. She’d never known her parents. Roderic had been kind, but always formal and distant. He’d never made her a doll or carried her on his shoulders, as she’d seen fathers do with their children at the Faire.

“Yes. But look. Here, it becomes strange.” Luminè turned another page, and Fable thought her eyes were playing tricks. The writing was in constant motion, swirling over the yellowish paper like curling smoke. Nothing took shape clearly enough to read.

“Shadows,” Luminè said. “The future—not yet written.” She riffled the pages. They were all the same, covered with letters that writhed, never taking shape.

But suddenly Luminè stiffened, nearly dropping the book. She gazed with wide eyes at the pages open before her.

Fable leaned closer. Luminè placed the book into her hands. In the midst of the flowing words were two lines Fable could read—lines that didn’t move, fixed like a rock in a stream. The fluid ink marks coursed all around them. The two lines were not only in her own language but in her own handwriting. She knew them all too well: the words of the One Prophecy. She’d written the prophecy four years before on her own paper, far from here, far from this book.

She’d been daydreaming, perhaps asleep, and her hand had moved the pen by itself.

*I will descend the Secret Stair
to the Cavern of Koth,
from which none has returned alive.
There, I will write my
final prophecy.*

Fable clutched Luminè’s arm for support, afraid her sudden dizziness would send her plummeting off the beam.

Luminè blinked and took back the book. “I’ve never seen this before. It’s appeared because you’re here.” She turned her head, regarding Fable steadily. “You know what it means.”

“That I’m going to die,” Fable whispered.

“Maybe.” Luminè shut the book and leaned her elbows on it, cupping her chin. “But it certainly means that one part of the future is decided. You will descend the Secret Stair.” She drummed her fingers on the leather cover, thinking. “The Cavern of Koth is where Khaos lives. Yes, you probably will die.”

Fable closed her eyes and made herself breathe evenly. “Where did you get this book? Is it from the library?”

“No. My father sent it to me by message bearer. I believe he was killed because he stole the book from someone who had no right to it—someone who wants it back.”

Fable lowered her head and ran her fingers through her hair. She felt trapped, crushed, as if she couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t be such a coward,” Luminè said. Fable glanced sharply at her. “That’s easy for you to say. There’s no prophecy sitting on you like a gravestone.”

“No, there’s not.” Luminè swung her feet back and forth over the abyss, as if she were sitting on any comfortable tree limb. “With me, it’s personal.”

“What do you mean?”

“On his last trip, my father went to find *The Book of Shadows*. It’s very powerful. I’ve read all about it in other books. Khaos stole it from the Hall of the Flame of Knowledge, and that flame went out. Fable Thatcher, don’t you see? Khaos killed my father for stealing the book back, for trying to return it to where it belongs. You may be going to your death, but you won’t be going alone.”

Fable looked wonderingly at her.

“But,” said Fable, “I don’t know where this ‘Secret Stair’ is, or this cavern.”

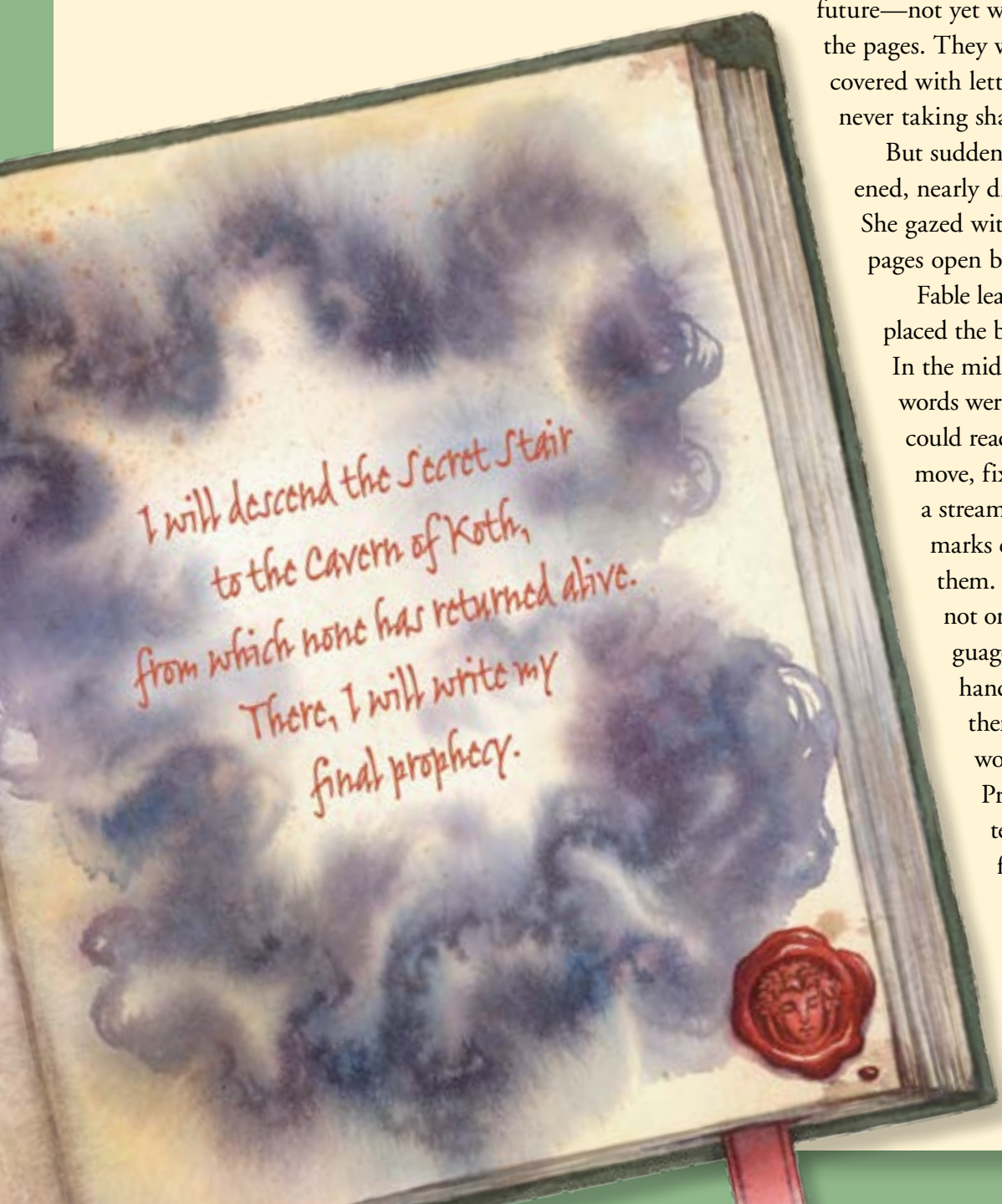
“Really?” Luminè winked. “I do.”

“If you know all this,” said Fable, “and you’re so brave, what have you been waiting for? Why haven’t you gone before now to set everything right?”

Luminè peered into the distance. “Maybe you are my courage, Prophecy Girl. I’ve been waiting for you and your gift. Do you want to write the future?” Grinning, the girl in the raven-feathered cloak held out her hand.

Fable Thatcher shook it.

to be continued



BEWARE THE SECRET STAIR,
FABLE! (SHIVER)



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