

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 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 who are attempting to sneak into Corginard disguised as merchants. After spoiling the robbers' plan, Fable and Luminè enter the City of Spires.

THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

PART FIVE

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

“WAKE UP!” Luminè shook Fable Thatcher's arm. “You've done it again!”

Fable blinked into the gray afternoon light and twirling snowflakes. She was curled on the stone bench where she'd dozed off in an *oyan*, a resting place for passersby, under a trellis roof woven with bare, dry vines. After the morning's long walk into Corginard, City of Spires, Fable had needed a nap. Luminè's feather cloak nestled in her bundle, out of sight. In their travel-stained *calan* cloaks, the girls drew no more than a glance from the hurrying, fur-capped citizens. Sheltered on this side street, Fable had fallen asleep while Luminè stood guard.

“I thought you were awake!” said Luminè, tugging Fable upright. “You wrote this. But then you kept snoring!”



Fable's old book of prophecies lay across her lap. Her fingers still clutched the pen and ink bottle.

She felt as if the snowflakes were inside her, freezing her blood. Another unconscious prophecy . . . her hand had written by itself, her mind asleep. Heart pounding, she tried to focus on the words she'd scrawled.

"It's Ishantrian!" said Luminè, her sea-gray eyes wide. "I thought you didn't know it."

"I don't." Fable touched the strange script, smudging the wet ink.

Luminè dug *The Book of Shadows* from her pack. Perching beside Fable, she flipped through the pages, where the magical writing flowed like smoke, never forming words. There, still in place, was the One Prophecy, which sealed Fable's doom. Drawing a breath, Luminè turned another page.

On the next leaf, in Fable's own handwriting and in her language, the new prophecy had written itself, solid and fixed among the fluid letters.

*To find the Secret Stair:
Beneath the boughs of reket trees,
Amidst the roars of mighty seas,
The bridge behind you swept away,
There you must await the day
When moon shines bright in Aruve.*

Wonder lit Luminè's face. "It's helping us! Either the Book itself . . . or your power. It's a riddle. When we solve it, we find the Secret Stair!"

Fable scowled, still annoyed that Luminè had claimed to know where the Secret Stair was, but in fact had known only that it was hidden somewhere in Corginard. Sighing, she studied the odd poem. Reket trees were tall and straight; forests of them stood in the south, but she'd seen no such trees in Cornigard. The sea was not far away, but its waves couldn't be heard here. "This isn't helpful," she muttered. "What 'bridge'? And 'Aruve'? That's not even a real place!"

"It's real," Luminè said. "The land of sleep, where we all go in dreams. The moon could shine there anytime we dream it does."

Fable frowned. "We can't control what we dream about."

"No." Luminè folded her arms, thinking. "The Stair is real, not a dream. My father said so, though he never went down it."

In the entire, enormous city, there was no one they could trust enough to ask about the Secret Stair. Fable tried to imagine ways she could write a helpful prophecy. It never worked to write about herself having good fortune—"Fable will find the Secret Stair now" would get no result. Perhaps she could prophesy a sign—a ray of light that would shine up from the Stair's entrance into the sky? No. She may as well blow a trumpet and announce herself to Khaos.

Fable let out a long breath. "Let's head for the lowest parts of the city. Wherever we find a stairway going down, we take it."

Luminè considered. "For now, that's as good a plan as any."

As she followed Luminè down a narrow, spiral stairway to the edge of a lapping canal, Fable had an idea. She might get away with writing the prediction that *Luminè* would find the Secret Stair. "Stop here!" she hissed.

Luminè glanced back impatiently.

Fable saw no one nearby. They had come to one of the lowest streets, where docks jutted into the black canal. A rat skittered over a coil of rotting rope, and widely spaced lanterns on hooks cast their reflections across the water. The air smelled of mud and wet stone that never dried. Light filtered down from avenues that crossed the canal high above. The far-off sounds of carts and voices echoed. Fable moved to a bench beside a low, crumbling wall overlooking the water. In the dimness, she opened her pack.

"Don't be a *miff*!" Luminè grabbed her arm. "We can't dawdle here!"

Fable shrugged free and took out her pen and ink. Opening her writing book, she glanced around at the gloomy street, almost a tunnel.

"Come on!" Luminè huffed. "This is a highway for robbers. We should keep moving."

"Let me work!" Fable said.

Quickly, she wrote: *Now Luminè will meet someone true of heart who will lead her safely to the Secret Stair.* She nodded. That should do nicely.

The silent street had unnerved Luminè. "I feel danger here. We ought to go back up . . ."

Fable was sure the prophecy would work. If Luminè were happier on higher streets, then so be it.

As they darted toward the spiral stairs, Luminè gasped and fell to her knees.

Fable thought her friend had tripped. Laughing, she clutched Luminè's arm to help her up. But at that moment, she felt a touch of ice at the small of her back, as if a wintry wind were blasting against her spine. She collapsed onto her hands. Luminè's eyes were wide. "Magic . . ." Luminè drew her sword, but it tumbled from her hand and clanged on the pavement.

Fable's hands were numb, too. She toppled onto her elbow, fighting for breath. The street's cold seeped into her. A chattering giggle rang in her ear, and she glimpsed something monkey-like, with spindly arms and legs, no bigger than a small child . . . something with yellow eyes and a toothy grin. It cavorted, a shape not solid, as if formed of shadow.

"Sorcery," Luminè snarled, stretched full length beside Fable. "A spell . . ."

Fable propped herself on both elbows, her hands quivering and useless. The monkey-thing's touch was a magic sting. Fable tried to see the creature, but it shimmered, always moving. The prophecy . . . what had gone wrong?

Then Fable heard a wheeze, like the sound made by a bellows—the hoarse laughter of an old man, who next spoke in a hoofs-on-gravel voice.

“Beauteously done, Hobnob! Splendid!”

Fable could see him now, a tall, bone-thin figure in a hooded cloak, shuffling closer, leaning on a wooden staff that hammered the stone at each step: *tock . . . tock . . . tock*. At the staff’s top was a whitish ornament—a globe?

No. A human skull.

Luminè struggled, trying to pull Fable away from the hunching stranger.

Again the old man wheezed with mirth, and the yellow-eyed imp snickered.

“You can’t run, little maids. Don’t fright yourselves. Old Derek only wants the Book. I knew you’d bring it, the powerful Book. I felt its approach.”

This was no true-hearted friend. Fable’s prophecy had failed.

“Khaos sent you!” Luminè choked. “You’re his servant.”

“Oh, no,” said the old man. “Derek Nightshade serves only himself. The Book, now, and I’ll be on my way and leave you to your beds of stone.” He thrust the staff toward Luminè and Fable in turn, and Fable wondered what mischief he was about.

Just then, the black hood slid back onto his scrawny shoulders, uncovering the man’s head. He was completely bald, his skin pasty, shiny. His eyes, without brows or lashes, were milky white—blind. With a chill, Fable understood that he was seeing through the skull’s eye sockets. He held its fleshless face close to Luminè’s rucksack, and the monkey-thing undid the leather straps.

“Thief!” Luminè raged, the cords in her neck straining. “It’s not yours! Can’t . . . have it!”

Derek Nightshade cackled. But the imp suddenly abandoned the pack. Its yellow eyes peered toward the canal.

Footfalls drew closer. Fable tried in vain to sit up.

Nightshade swung his staff, confused, searching with the skull’s gaze.

Someone leaped over Fable, waving a torch and a sword.

“Begone, conjurer!” It was a boy who spoke. Fable saw his broad back, his brown hair flying. He swept the blazing torch toward the imp, which bounded to hide behind its master. Just as the skull’s empty stare fixed upon him, the boy struck with his blade, shearing the skull off the staff.

There was a crash like thunder, and the staff splintered into burning fragments. The blast hurled Nightshade against the wall, and then he slumped to the floor.

The boy raced after the rolling skull. He brought his leather shoe down, smashing it.

Nightshade screamed, covering his head. The monkey-imp burst into green fire, its hideous form visible in one searing flash. Then it vanished in a shower of sparks. They smoldered, slowly fading out.

The boy looked for other enemies, his torch flaring at each twist. Then he knelt before the girls with concern.

He seemed about Fable’s age, his face weathered and honest. Hair fell to the shoulders of his thick woolen tunic. His trousers were of leather.

Luminè hoisted herself to a sitting position. “Who—?”

“It’s not safe here,” the boy said, sword ready. “I’m called Jonah.”

Nightshade crawled up the stairs like a pathetic spider, feeling his way, retreating.

Fable’s limbs tingled as sensation crept back. Breath came more easily. “Why did you come to help us?”

The boy—Jonah—blinked. “I . . . don’t know. It’s odd. I don’t usually climb up here. But then I saw you in trouble.”

“I knew it!” Fable said. “We can trust him. I brought him.”

“You?” Jonah frowned. “Are you a sorcerer?”

“No.” Fable lowered her voice. “But we’re here to defeat an evil one.” She thought, How bold I sound! “We need your help finding the Secret Stair to the Cavern of Koth.”

The boy turned a shade paler.

Luminè shook her head, her eyes full of doubt.

Fable gripped her friend’s arm. “Show him what I wrote.”

“You can’t go there,” Jonah said. “You mustn’t even speak of it.”

Fable smiled.

Reluctantly, Luminè opened *The Book of Shadows*. She tapped the poem about the Secret Stair.

Jonah’s jaw hung open as he watched the smoky script twining around the fixed letters. He narrowed his eyes. “You’re not witches?”

“Can you figure this out?” Fable pressed. “How can we get to Aruve, the land of dreams?”

Jonah focused on the poem, his lips moving slightly as he read. He glanced up.

“There’s an Aruve here, too, in this city. Not exactly the land of dreams. I can take you there.”

“Please,” said Fable. She grinned at Luminè, who put the Book away and made a show of picking up her sword from the street, letting Jonah see how she handled the weapon.

“Swords will do no good,” Jonah said. “That cavern is death.”

“I know.” Fable climbed to her knees, her strength returning.

“I’ve never heard of an entrance in Corginard,” said Jonah. “Your magic book could be wrong.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not.”

Jonah smiled ruefully. “Then I won’t know you for long.” Raising his torch, he beckoned with a jerk of his head and led them toward the dark canal.

He had a small boat with a square prow. It was loaded with dirty bottles, with piles of rusting metal scraps. He ushered the girls aboard. They each found a seat. Standing in the stern, Jonah poled the punt along the gurgling canal.

“You collect garbage?” asked Luminè.

“I gather these things and sell them, and I save the money for my life’s work—rebuilding my father’s ship, the *Whale*.” After a silence, he added, “I don’t know why I’m helping you.”

“I didn’t give you a choice.” Fable smiled. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, you’re not a witch at all,” he said.

“I’m not.”



FOR HOURS, THE boat glided along the waterways. There was little to see but dank brickwork, where *nyxt* lizards clung, and patches of *garcus lopian* with its poisonous odor. They stopped once to sleep, the girls wrapped in their cloaks, side by side in a soft nest of seining nets. Jonah dozed with his knees pulled up, leaning against the transom.

They drifted finally into a wide, square pool like a courtyard, its edges walled in brick, its high ceiling supported with mighty wooden beams. Above the waterline, behind archways and pillars, spread dozens of shops, markets, crafters' stalls, a stable, and several inns—an underground plaza of the canals.

"Aruve," Jonah announced. "The land of dreams, if you like to buy things. I'll sell my flotsam and jetsam here."

Fable carefully took in the sight. Nothing looked like a Secret Stair.

Luminè studied the poem again. "Look. There's the moon." On the plaza's far wall, a huge, ornamental moon of brass gazed down. The artisan who made it had given it a smiling face.

"But nothing else matches the prophecy." Fable gazed around in frustration, wondering what she'd missed.

The shops opened. Storekeepers greeted customers. Walkways filled. Traffic increased in the streets above, the wheels of wagons up

there rumbling in the underground world. It was like being inside a drum. "*The roars of mighty seas,*" breathed Fable. "Seas of traffic!"

Luminè stared at her, then looked at the ceiling. "Those beams—reket wood! Even indoors, we're *Beneath the boughs of reket trees!*"

Jonah chuckled. "Line by line, it's coming true!"

A barge crossed a tunnel behind them. Fable turned to see a drawbridge pulled aside by chains to allow the ponderous barge to pass.

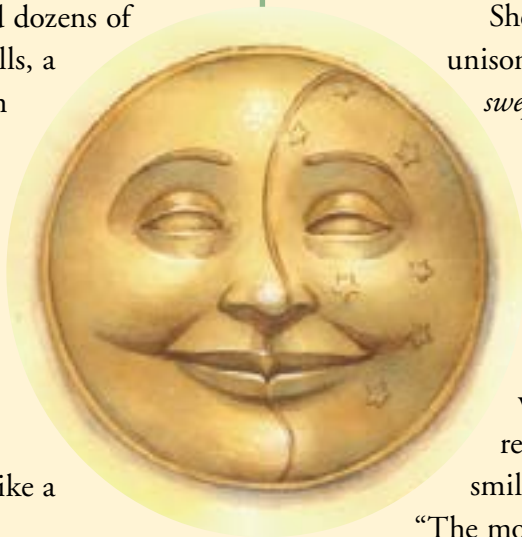
She and Luminè cried out in unison: "*The bridge behind you swept away!*"

At that moment, somewhere outside the wall of Aruve, the sun rose. A single shaft of rosy light fell through a chink and touched the brass moon, which lit up with the reflected dawn and seemed to smile wider.

"The moon, shining in the day," said Jonah. "You were right after all." He winked at Fable. "Witches."

Fable felt light-headed. They'd found it—the Secret Stair.

to be continued



This Crowd-Sorcery story features characters and fantasy words created on the Chatterbox by Cricket readers. Special thanks to John E. for creating Derek Nightshade, to Bianca R. for creating Jonah, to Marigold for inspiring Fable's prophecy poem, and to Christie M., Lyra Telles, and Me.

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