

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LEVEN THUMPS*

OBERT SKYE



PILLAGAGE

PILLAGER

OBERT SKYE



© 2010 Obert Skye.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, Shadow Mountain®. The views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of Shadow Mountain.

All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Visit us at ShadowMountain.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skye, Obert, author.

Pillage / Obert Skye.

pages cm.

Sequel to: Choke.

Summary: Upon his mother's death, fifteen-year-old Beck Phillips is sent to live with an eccentric uncle he had never met in a remote manor house, where he learns that his family suffers from a curse that allows him to make plants grow on command and dragon eggs hatch.

ISBN 978-1-59038-922-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

eISBN 1-60641-698-7 (eletronic)

[1. Magic—Fiction. 2. Blessing and cursing—Fiction. 3. Eccentrics and eccentricities—Fiction. 4. Dragons—Fiction. 5. Uncles—Fiction. 6. Household employees—Fiction. 7. Identity—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S62877Pil 2008 [Fic]—dc22

2008005419

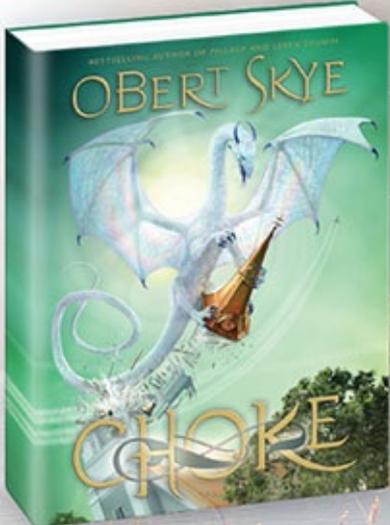
Printed in the United States of America

Worzalla Publishing Co., Stevens Point, WI

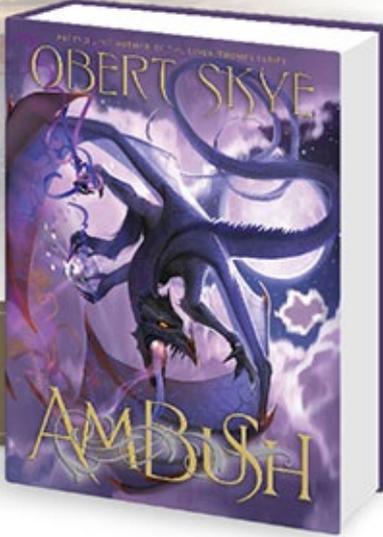
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

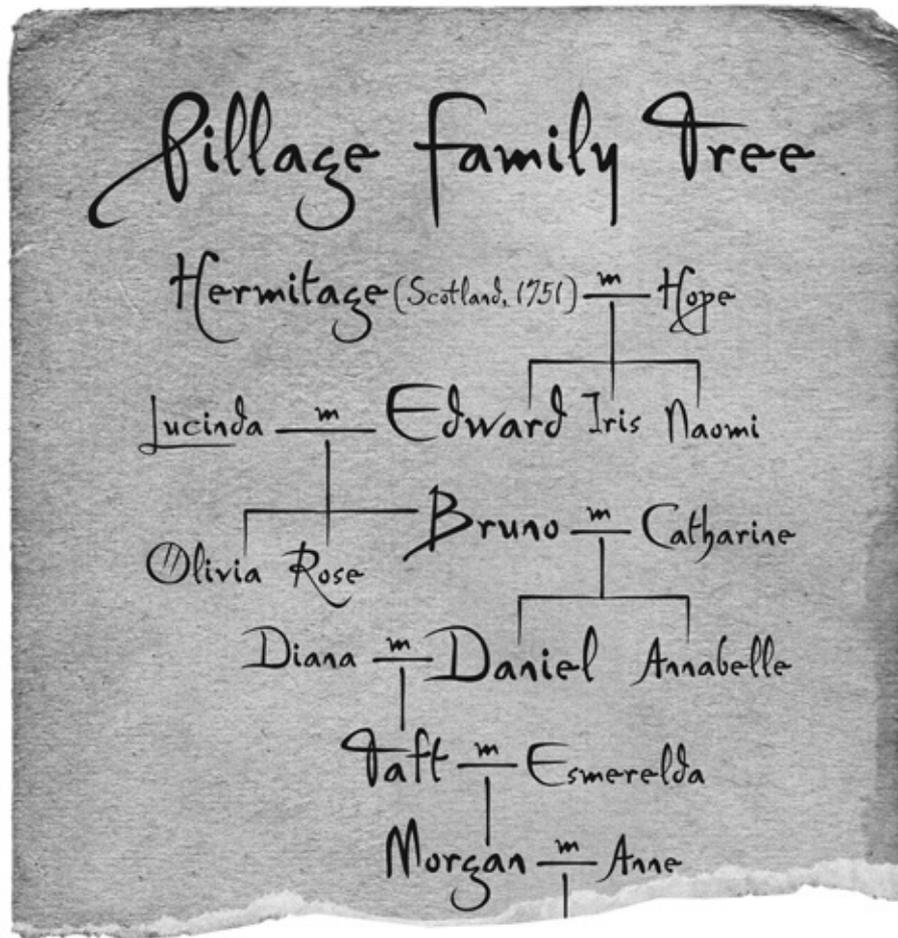
THE PILLAGE SERIES

CONTINUE
THE
JOURNEY



**COMPLETE
THE SERIES**





“Then what about dragons?” I questioned, finally getting to the question I really wanted to ask.

Aeron stopped looking out the window and gazed at me. His hands shook slightly and I could see a dark change in his eyes. It was as obvious as black clouds gathering for a deadly storm.

“Dragons?” he whispered dryly.

“Dragons,” I said firmly.

Aeron breathed out slowly, letting his shoulders drop. “Dragons,” he finally said. “Well, unfortunately, they are a far different thing.”

Table of Contents

Kind and Clever Hooligan
I'm Miserable Now
Nowhere Fast
Up to the Old House
Tonight I Am Aware
The Headmaster Routine
A Rush and a Push
I Started Something
Paint an Ugly Picture
There Is a Glow That Won't Snuff Out
Ask
Two-Quarters of a Person
I Wonder
How Long Until Now?
Me with a Thorn in My Side
Is It Really So Odd?
Still Sick
Disgusting Lie
Barbarism Begins
Oscillate Madly
Panic
Death at One's Side
I Know It's Ending
Having Everything Now

Kind and Clever Hooligan

I shouldn't have said it, but the word slipped out of my mouth as easy as air. It wasn't exactly the kind of word any well-behaved student would use, which sort of explained why I had just used it. And it certainly isn't the most elegant way to start off a story, but it honestly represents what I was feeling. Besides, I could have said something a lot stronger. But not everybody wants to read a story with those kinds of words and thoughts being expressed in the very first sentence.

"Stop swearing," Jason screamed.

"Then stop pushing," I yelled back. "I'm pinned in."

Jason pushed again.

"Seriously," I snapped. "I'm stuck."

"Then let's crawl out!" he yelled back. "It's too dark to see anymore."

"I can't move," I insisted. "I'm really stuck."

The "I" and the "I'm" in both those sentences was me: Beck Phillips. I hate to talk about myself, but a few bits of information might be helpful. I'm fifteen, but I'll be sixteen in three months. Which makes me fifteen and three-quarters, but only a child would describe it that way—and I don't think of myself as a child. Unless of course you are using the word *child* as in, "He's an only child."

In that case, it's completely true.

I am an only child with an unbalanced single mother. I suppose both of those things could have something to do with the mess I was in, but my mother, Francine, watches a lot of *Oprah* so I've heard how "it's important for people to take responsibility for their own actions."

That said, I, Beck Phillips, take full responsibility for being stuck in my school's pitch-black venting system with my friend, Jason, behind me and a garbage bag full of angry bees in front of me.

The idea had seemed so simple: bag the huge beehive that had been hanging low in a fast-growing tree near my apartment, release it into the school's ventilation system, and enjoy a couple of days off as they try to exterminate the pests. Jason thought we should release the assailants at the vent's outside opening, but I believe "a job worth doing is worth doing well." Again, my mom watches a lot of *Oprah*.

So I insisted we crawl into the ducts as far as possible. That way we could achieve maximum pandemonium. My insistence now seemed stupid. In fact, the entire plan was beginning to feel foolish.

I'd like to say I was simply doing what I was doing to make everyone's life more exciting, but even I didn't believe that. In the words of my school's counselor, I was acting out to be heard. She thought that because I had moved around so much and

attended so many different schools no one ever really got to know me. She thought that my subconscious didn't enjoy this. She thought that's why I was "acting out." I thought she, like my mother, watched too much *Oprah*.

Of course, there may have been some truth to what she said. After all, I had been at this school for a month and I don't think anyone aside from Jason knew my name. I didn't have a grudge against any single student, I was just tired of being invisible. I figured this would get my name out there.

Beck Phillips, bee wrangler.

Had I been standing out in the open on a sunny day I would look like most almost-sixteen-year-old boys. My brown hair is a bit too long and hangs over my ears; it blocks about twenty percent of what my brown eyes take in. My ears stick out a bit and I probably have more confidence than a person in my shoes should. I'm taller than most guys my age and even though I'm never one to brag I should point out that a seventeen-year-old girl at the community pool told her friend that I was cute.

"I'm not staying in here, Beck," Jason panicked, bringing me back to the situation at hand. "I'm getting out."

"Quiet," I said firmly. "Someone will hear us. We're probably right above Mr. Shin's class."

"I don't care," Jason said. "This stinks. I never wanted to do this anyway."

"But you are," I pointed out, still trying to free myself from the tight duct. "Now pull me out, I can't move!"

"No," Jason said.

"I'm stuck," I hissed. "Pull me out."

"No."

I could hear Jason begin to move away, backing down the duct.

"You can't just leave me," I said as quietly as my worried soul would let me. "Some friend."

"Whatever," Jason said. "I barely know you, Beck."

Jason was right about that. He was a skinny kid with big teeth and a large, flat forehead. He seemed to wear a lot of green shirts and his father worked for the city auditing books. I had met Jason while playing basketball at the park. I was desperately trying to impress a couple of girls with my moves when I ran into him crossing the court. We fell to the ground, got up and yelled at each other for a couple of minutes, and then decided it would probably be easier to be friends. We weren't terribly alike, but I thought that, with enough time, we could get along.

Apparently, I was wrong.

"I'll tell them it was your idea," I yelled, not able to keep my voice down any longer. "You'll be busted for sure."

If Jason replied I couldn't hear it. He was long gone. He had left me alone, in a dark duct with a bag full of increasingly ticked-off bees.

"Nice," I mumbled to myself. "Thanks a lot, jerk."

I thought about yelling for help, but I still wasn't convinced that I couldn't find a way out of the situation unscathed. My right hand was stretched out in front of me

holding the cinched black bag and my left arm was pinned to my left side. I twisted my legs, trying to get some movement, but I was stuck tight. Sweat began to slowly and annoyingly drip down into my eyes.

“Perfect.”

I breathed deep, trying not to panic.

“I’m going to die here,” I said nervously, halfway believing it. “What a nice way ___”

Thwump!

Somewhere behind me the heat kicked on. Almost instantly large waves of warm air washed through and around my captive body. The sweat dripping into my eyes increased but I couldn’t reach to wipe it away.

“I’m in trouble,” I said needlessly into the warm dark.

I remembered some teacher at one of the many schools I had been shuffled through over my life having said something about heat making things expand. With that tiny bit of vague knowledge, I begged the universe to please expand the metal duct currently trapping me. In return, I promised not to release the bees.

The duct didn’t expand.

I upped my commitment and promised I would start to care about others and I would try not to swear so much.

The duct felt even tighter. I could feel myself cooking.

“Son of a . . .” I stopped myself.

I made one last promise, but even before I finished it in my head, I knew I wouldn’t keep that particular promise.

I closed my eyes, hoping that in my last moments of life some wise wizard would appear to me in my delirium and invite me to enter a portal to some place much cooler and filled with light.

The sweat on my face and skin felt like boiling water. My head rang from the noise of the hot air. I began to thrash and scream. I would have liked to go out in a much braver and dignified way, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I hollered as loud as I could, hoping someone would hear and come to my rescue.

In my state of panic and confusion I mistakenly forgot how important it was to keep holding onto the bag. I began to beat my fists against the side of the duct.

“Somebody! Help!”

The furnace stopped. I couldn’t see anything in the dark, but the cooler air felt like a positive sign.

“Hello!” I yelled. “Anyone!”

I thought I could hear someone hollering far away down another duct. I stopped yelling to listen.

I remembered the bees.

Something light tickled my right arm at the same moment tiny wings brushed against my nose. I grabbed for the bag in the dark, but the heat moving through the vent had blown it just out of my reach. My heart began to beat so hard I could hear it pounding against the metal duct.

I don't like bees. I never have. I find their tiny striped bodies to be as frightening as almost anything I had ever seen in a horror movie. Now, thanks to my panic, the bag was open and the bees were free. I could feel more and more of them moving up my arm. I knew if I moved it would only make things worse, so I kept still, forced to endure the horrid feeling of prickly bee feet inching their way up my arm.

They made it to my face.

One crawled over my lips and down my neck.

"Heeeellp," I tried to scream through the corner of my sealed lips. "Heeeeeelpp meeee."

My plea came out like a slow leak.

Bees began moving under my collar and down the back of my neck. I could hear them buzzing near my ears. Their wings sounded like a hundred chain saws. I had been mad at myself for wishing the heat would turn off. Now I wanted it to flip back on and blow the bees away.

I could feel one on my ankle.

It was too much. The sweat on my face and the thousands of tiny legs crawling over me was more than I could take. I'd always thought if I were ever faced with some terrible situation I would take the high road and bravely make the best of it.

It turns out that's not true.

I went from a boy of fifteen and three-quarters to a child of five and a half in an instant. I screamed like a tiny kid getting his hair pulled by the monster under the bed. I violently kicked my legs and bucked my body up and down as hard as I could.

Apparently the bees didn't like that. I could feel them sting my ankle, my cheek, my arm, and my back.

I freaked out.

I rocked so hard I knocked my right shoulder out of joint and banged my head against the duct. All I could hear was the noise of me shouting and what sounded like two billion bees shouting back at me.

I suppose it was lucky for me that most heating ducts weren't designed to hold the weight of a person. I felt fortunate—I also felt the duct break loose beneath my waist. My right leg slipped out. I kicked harder, banging my head with such force that I could see stars and hear the sound of angels screaming.

The duct floor beneath my head broke open and the weight of my body shifted wildly as the entire section came loose. I could feel a terrible scraping on my right hip as the bottom dropped out from under me. The section of broken duct crashed down against a large counter filled with dishes and bottles. I would have fallen with the duct had it not been for the large metal seam where the duct had once been attached catching at the waistband of my jeans. I dangled from the vent like a human piñata.

Bees burst out of the broken vent and into the room. I could see I had been wrong about a couple of things: one, I was not above Mr. Shin's room. I was above Miss Harpthorn's home economics class. And two, it had not been a bunch of angels screaming, but a large group of girls—some of the very girls I had once unimpressed on a basketball court.

Miss Harpthorn and her class looked up at me like I was a mangled animal that

had come to life to attack them. I was about to say something so funny that it would have put everyone at ease and made the whole situation nothing but a great story, but just then my pants ripped, sending me pants-less down onto a counter full of dishes and surrounded by far too many eyewitnesses.

Bees swarmed through the room. I closed my eyes and prayed I was dreaming. I opened them just in time to witness a fat bee sting the tip of my nose. I screamed and swatted at the bee as I fell off the counter onto the hard linoleum floor. A broken dish sliced a long cut along my right arm.

The room was filled with girls screaming and bees buzzing. I felt a strange sense of accomplishment. Someone grabbed me by my cut arm and tried to pull me up. I shifted and turned, sitting up on my rear. Whoever was helping me let go. I looked up and saw the large face of Principal Spools.

“Beck, are you okay?” he asked, his red face simmering.

A fistful of bees flew between us.

“I think so.”

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said sadly, sounding way too calm after what I had just done.

“I was in the duct.”

He reached his hand out and I took it. He pulled me to my feet.

“You were looking for me?” I questioned, wondering if Jason had crawled out and told on me immediately.

“Something’s happened,” he said loudly, swatting at bees with his hand.

I wanted to say, “Duh,” but his tone of voice indicated he was referring to something *besides* me releasing bees into the school and falling pants-less into the girls’ cooking class.

“Come with me,” he said much more compassionately than I expected.

“What is it?” I asked nervously.

Principal Spools said nothing, moving me out of the room and into the hall. The school was alive with students running for the exits and batting at bees in the air. Girls and boys alike were screaming and frantically looking for any way out.

I was torn. Part of me felt as if I had accomplished something big. I had created a mess. My body ached from the fall as well as from the cuts and bee stings, but I could walk. I should have been proud. But the truth was Operation a Couple of Days Off had failed miserably. And unbeknownst to me there was still a large dose of pain in my immediate future.

It’s interesting how something as bad as what I had done could be overlooked and almost forgotten because of the death of someone I loved.

Hermitage Pillage was born in Scotland in the year 1751. He was a kind and honest man who possessed a remarkable ability to grow things. He farmed his entire life, wanting nothing more than to work the land and assure his family's happiness. Hermitage died peacefully in his modest home. His wife, Hope, whom he loved dearly, passed away in her sleep three days later. They were survived by two daughters and one son. Their son's name was Edward.

Excerpt from section one of The Grim Knot, as recorded by Daniel Phillips

I'm Miserable Now

I watched the fat drops of rain roll down the car windows like frightened tears, darting side to side and mixing quickly with the tracks of drops that had streamed down moments before. The beating of the rain on the car's roof was thunderous. I wondered if my life would ever be silent again.

My eyes burned and my head ached from trying not to cry. I could see through the wet window that my mother's coffin was being lowered slowly into the ground by the aid of two thick yellow straps. There was a small blue tent over the grave, protecting the coffin and the tiny group of shivering people looking on.

"Pointless," I whispered. I didn't care how much protection or cover was available. Even if a single drop of rain never touched my skin, I knew my soul was going to be wet for some time.

My mother had not been well. My father had left us when I was an infant and my mom couldn't hold down a job. She couldn't remember to pay bills or buy groceries. We were constantly getting kicked out of apartments because she couldn't remember to turn off the bathtub water or the gas on the stove. I tried to help, but each year as she grew more confused it became harder for her to even have me around. She knew I was there, but I'm pretty sure it only made her feel trapped.

There had been state workers and cops who had worried about my welfare, but in the end they had other cases to concern themselves with and I was always able to stay out of their control.

The last few months had been the worst for my mother. She had gone to the doctor just last week to get some new pills. It was now painfully obvious those pills had not worked.

I watched the casket disappear below the horizon. Once it was out of sight, a short dark man in overalls and carrying a shovel appeared out of nowhere. I watched as he dug the shovel into a nearby pile of dirt. The shovel sliced into the soil and then the man tossed the large lumps of earth down into the hole. The mourners slowly drifted off to mourn someplace less wet.

"It was a lovely service," Mr. Claude said soothingly, placing his left hand on my shoulder. "Very nice indeed."

I looked over at the man sitting next to me in the backseat of the car. Mr. Claude was a thin man with ruddy skin and unnaturally black hair. He wore a gold tie and a black suit that was as faded as the life that had just been honored. Mr. Claude was my mother's lawyer. I had never understood why she needed a lawyer in the first place, but she said it was because of her family. I had only met him twice before and now I was forced to share one of the worst moments of my life with him.

“There was nothing lovely about it,” I argued.

“Well, the flowers were beautiful,” he sniffed.

“Flowers?” I said incredulously. “Who are you?”

Mr. Claude’s face reddened a bit and he straightened his already straight tie. The rain became even heavier, making it impossible for there to be a truly awkward silence. Eventually Mr. Claude spoke again.

“Beck, this may not be the best time, but I suppose there is no best time for what must be said.”

I stared at Mr. Claude and wished he would disappear. It didn’t work.

“Your mother was financially strapped at the time of her death,” he said as though it were some great surprise.

You mean us moving to a poor neighborhood and me having to go to a crummy school and get free lunch wasn’t just her trying to be humble? That’s what I wanted to say. Instead I sarcastically said, “Really?”

Mr. Claude sniffed.

“Fortunately for you, she comes from money.”

The words made no sense to me. I pictured a large pile of money giving birth to her.

“What?” I asked.

“Her family was wealthy.”

“Rich?”

“I suppose.”

“And they’re sending money?” I asked hopefully.

I had been spending the last few days sleeping at my neighbor’s house. Mrs. Welch was a kind old woman who had befriended us the second we moved in. When she heard my mother passed away, she instantly insisted I stay with her until they could figure out where I would be best placed.

Best placed.

I loved whenever I heard someone say that—like I was a puzzle piece or a vase that people simply needed to find a spot for.

“They are not sending money,” Mr. Claude said. “But she has a brother. He’s sent for you.”

He said it so casually I thought he might be joking. So I laughed.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No,” he insisted. “I’m quite serious. You are lucky to have someplace to go. If not for your uncle, you would be put into foster care until adopted. And I must say, Beck, the chance for adoption at your age is not stellar.”

“I’m an orphan? What about my dad? He’s got to be somewhere.”

“We’ve made every attempt to find your father,” Mr. Claude said with authority. “But there’s no trace or clue as to where he is. It seems your mother has had no contact with him since he left. Nobody has.”

“So I’m being sent away?”

“What did you expect?” he said dryly. “You’ve got no parents here.”

It took everything I had in me to stop my eyes from dripping. I hadn’t cried yet and I was in no mood to do so now. I let the anger I felt hold back the tears. I was tempted to get out of the car and just run away.

“Wait,” I remembered. “You said my mom’s brother is rich?”

“Your Uncle Aeron is very well off,” Mr. Claude said. “I’ve seen pictures of his estate and it is quite astounding.”

“Did you bring the pictures?” I asked greedily.

“No, no,” Mr. Claude waved. “It didn’t seem appropriate.”

“Of course not,” I muttered. “Why show me where I’m going?”

“Listen, Beck, you’d do well to work on your manners,” Mr. Claude said boldly. “I’m certain your uncle will not tolerate such sharpness.”

“I’ll try to be dull,” I said. “So where am I going?”

“Kingsplot is a couple of days travel from here, but there’s a single-rail line that goes all the way” he said. “Your uncle has graciously sent a train ticket for you.”

“How nice of him,” I said bitterly. “I can’t just get on a train and go live with someone I’ve never met.”

“It’s either that or be put into a home here with someone you’re not related to,” he pointed out.

The rain on the roof simmered. It went from boisterous to beckoning, sounding like a soft whisper from Mother Nature herself. Most of the dirt that had been sitting next to my mother’s grave was gone. I hated how I felt. I hated the dark inside of me that wanted nothing more than to break a window with my fist, or light something on fire, or . . .

Mr. Claude tapped on the glass dividing us from the driver. “To the train station,” he ordered.

“Train station?” I asked with panic.

“I told you they’ve sent tickets.”

“Today? I’m leaving today?”

“Well, you’ve got no place to stay,” he pointed out. “Even your neighbor has run out of compassion for you. I guess she didn’t enjoy you putting her wig on that stray dog.”

“It was a joke,” I defended.

“It was the final straw.”

“I can’t just leave,” I argued, feeling like I needed to be where my mother was buried. She was all I had. “Don’t make me leave her.”

“You’ll feel better once you’re traveling,” Mr. Claude said. “I promise.”

“What about my stuff?” I asked, wondering how he could promise me how I’d feel.

“The few things you had are packed and waiting at the station,” he said. “As your mother wished.”

“She knew she was going to die now?”

“She knew it was inevitable.” He sniffed again. “She also knew it would be best to make it as easy for you as possible.”

“What about my plant?”

“What plant?” Mr. Claude scoffed.

The plant in question was a large-leafed fern I had raised from a tiny seedling. It had meant a ton to me during the last month. It was the one living thing that responded to me and was better off because I was around.

“My plant,” I argued. “Mrs. Welch has it.”

“I’m sure she’ll take good care of it,” Mr. Claude said callously. “Move on, driver.”

“But—”

“It’s a plant,” Mr. Claude said soothingly. “The world is full of plants.”

I felt angry. The world wasn’t full of my plants. My world at the moment wasn’t full of anything but pain. I had loved my mother and now the only person who had ever had any patience or love for me was gone and I was being forced to move away.

The driver put the car into gear and pulled slowly away from the graveside.

I don’t care what you say; I had every right to cry.

Edward Pillage was not at all like his father. He cared only for himself and for money. Edward used the pillage gift of growing to amass great wealth and power. In a few short years, he had become one of the richest men in Scotland.

Excerpt from section two of The Grim Knot, as recorded by Daniel Phillips

Nowhere Fast

I threw my backpack onto the red cloth seat and plopped down next to it. The backpack and an old suitcase in the storage cart made up my entire entourage. I owned surprisingly little in my life besides the black shirt and jeans I was currently wearing.

An old man and a young girl sat across from me in the train compartment. From the way they sat, it was obvious that they didn't know one another. The old man was nose deep into a magazine. He had a half-bald head and a full beard. The girl was at least my age and looked both bored and bothered that I was what she would be staring at for the next little while.

"It could be worse," I tried, smiling a half smile at her.

The girl looked at me as if she were unsure of what language I was speaking.

"I mean I could be some deranged fat guy who smelled."

It took a moment, but like waiting for a stubborn sunrise, her smile eventually appeared across the bottom of her face. She was the prettiest girl I had seen in a long time.

"I'm Beck," I said.

"Kate," she replied coolly.

"Hi, Kate."

She sort of waved.

"How far are you going?" I asked.

"The end of the line," she answered.

"Kingsplot?"

Kate nodded.

"Me too," I said much too excitedly to come off sounding cool.

Her sunrise smile faded but that didn't stop me from staring. She was beautiful in a farmer's daughter, spelling-bee champion kind of way. She had long red hair that was partially held back by a thin black headband. Her skin was as white as my knuckles had been the second before I fell from the vent. She wore a plaid skirt and long white knee-high socks. Her white shirt was mostly covered by a thick black sweater. She looked caught between styles, as if she had been preppy but was slowly switching to hippie. Her eyes watched the scenery outside.

"It's far," she added. "Very far."

"I'm going to live there," I said cleverly.

"That's great," she replied, not bothering to turn and look at me.

I missed her smile.

"I have no idea what it's like there," I said, hoping she did.

“I’m sure you’ll get to know it.”

“So, that’s your home?”

“Yes,” she said flatly.

The train jerked forward, grunting and hissing. I didn’t like the movement. I felt like I was abandoning my mom and the little bit of life I had lived here.

The half-bald man in our compartment set his magazine down and rubbed the point where his nose met his eyebrows. He looked tired and concerned about having to travel in the company of two teenagers.

I watched the landscape speed up outside. In a few minutes the world was washing by in a stream of color and stretching images. I thought about the last time I had seen my mother alive. It had been the morning of the bee incident. I had complained to her that I needed some money and she had slurred something about how everyone wants more than they have. I tried to move the words around in my head to make it seem as if she had said something less profound and more personal.

“So, it’s a nice place?” I asked Kate. “Kingsplot?”

Kate looked at me and then over to the old guy. She appeared confused by the fact that I was still talking to her. I suddenly wished I was a fat deranged man that smelled just to get back at her.

“All right,” I said strongly. “I guess I’ll just talk to myself from now on.”

Kate yawned and the old man pulled his coat up over his head and pushed his body back into the seat.

“This is my first train ride,” I said, mostly to myself.

“My father doesn’t trust planes,” she said shortly. “He has no problem sending his daughter to visit a bunch of unknown relatives in a big city, but he’s concerned about me flying home.”

I stared at her for a moment and then said, “My father left when I was about one.”

Kate shrugged and yawned again.

A man in a blue uniform wearing a cap two sizes too big for his head stepped into our compartment.

“Are we all in the right spots?” he asked as if we were babies in numbered cribs.

I showed him my ticket and he looked at the others.

“Don’t open the window,” he insisted. “The windows along this entire section have not worked properly ever since the train derailed a month ago. The entire frame has twisted just a bit.”

I couldn’t think of a single reason why he should be telling us that.

“So windows closed,” he continued. “And if you need assistance there will be an attendant one car down.”

“Are there any vacancies on the train?” the older man asked.

“I believe we have one empty seat two cars up.”

The man gathered his stuff as quickly as he could and scurried from the compartment as fast as a rat abandoning a sinking ship.

“Have a pleasant trip,” the uniformed man said to us.

“I can’t see how we couldn’t,” I answered sarcastically.

The attendant's smile looked forced. Kate simply yawned again.

I had never been on a train before and the clack of the wheels as they sped forward was oddly intoxicating. Each mile we traveled my eyelids became increasingly heavy. I tried to fight it, but sleep was smothering me. I said a couple of clever things to Kate and she replied in unkind.

I shifted my backpack and stretched out on the empty seat next to me. I pushed my head up against the small pillow the train company had provided. There was a musty smell in the cabin that made it seem even more uncomfortable than it was. I breathed slowly and could smell a trace of smoke. I would have opened my eyes to investigate it, but my mind was sick of being awake. I had not slept well ever since my mom had died. My body felt like it was in the mood to make up for lost time. I fell asleep instantly.

When I woke up, Kate was staring at me. Despite my open eyes my body still felt like it was asleep.

"Did I snore?" I asked sleepily.

"And drooled," she said disgusted.

I wiped at my mouth and moved to sit up. My head weighed a hundred pounds. I shifted and my head fell back down against the seat. I tried to blink the sleep and pain out through my eye sockets.

"I don't feel so great," I said.

"Maybe that's why you slept so long," Kate suggested.

"How long?"

"Twelve hours."

"What?" I said in shock, sitting up. My head wobbled like a large melon with an off-balance center. "Whoa."

"You slept for about twelve hours," Kate said again. "You slept through five stops, dinner, and unless you get up and move it you'll miss breakfast. They stop serving it at nine-thirty."

"I can't believe it."

My stomach growled out loud.

"Maybe your stomach will convince you."

"Where are we now?" I asked, looking out the window.

"About two hours from Kingsplot."

The scenery was green all over. Tall trees grew along the tracks and stretched their branches over the train creating a tunnel of foliage and making the cabin dark for the time of day. Through the breaks in the trees I could see a dull blue lake and mountains taller than the window would allow me to take in. I might have found the view interesting, but my mind was quick to remind me that being on the train at all was the result of my loss.

I felt depressed and sick.

Kate closed her eyes and leaned back. I hoped she would fall asleep and begin to drool. I lifted my backpack up off the floor and onto the empty seat next to me. I unzipped the main compartment and pulled out a thin book. It was a worn journal that