Tom Elm had always known the Valley was big, but now, as he gazed out over the side of the Queen of the Sky, it seemed to stretch on forever.

It also reminded him of just how enormous a task had been entrusted to him.

The magical place called the Dreaming had chosen him to lead a quest to save the Valley from an evil called the Nacht: an evil that threatened to shadow everything in darkness.

“Oh, is that all?” he murmured. Him . . . a twelve-year-old boy and turnip farmer given a job like this. He continued to look out over the Valley as the balloon ship soared above it, and his thoughts drifted to his family — his mother, father, and baby sister, all locked in the grip of an endless sleep.

A chill ran down the boy’s spine like an icy finger,
the shaggy hair at the back of his neck prickling to attention. To say that he was afraid was an understatement. He couldn’t remember ever being more scared.

*This isn’t a time for fear,* Tom told himself, trying to squelch the flames of anxiety before they could grow too high.

There was too much at stake.

He reached up to grasp the odd, rough stone that hung on a leather thong around his throat, a stone that he once thought lucky because he had found it in the middle of a giant turnip. Tom smiled sadly, remembering simpler times when he didn’t have to worry about leading quests and saving the world. Being a turnip farmer suddenly didn’t seem so bad.

As it turned out, the stone was actually a fragment of the very first ray of light that had driven back the darkness and nightmares at the beginning of time. Finding it had been the start of his mission for the Dreaming, which was to search out the remaining pieces of the Spark and to make it whole again.

But the evil that threatened the world had plans of its own.

Tom gasped as a vision of four men swam before his mind’s eye — the Constable and his deputies, who were possessed by evil spirits serving the Nacht. Tom and his friends had managed to escape them in the *Queen of the Sky,* but something told him that they had not seen the last
of those foul creatures, that those who served the Nacht did not give up so easily.

“We’re taking her down!” announced a voice from behind, reminding Tom that he wasn’t alone in this monumental task. Others had also been chosen.

He turned to watch Percival Bone inside the wheelhouse of the flying ship that the adventurer had built for exploration. Percival quickly worked the various wheels, valves, and levers in order to bring the *Queen of the Sky* closer to earth.

Percival saw that he was being watched, and gave Tom a wave. “This looks to be as good a spot as any,” he called out, pointing through the window of the pilot’s station at a clearing in the forest below while holding the ship’s wheel steady. “Toss out the anchor, and we’ll be good to go.”

Tom moved, happy to be doing something other than thinking.

A sudden squeal caught his attention, and he looked across the deck. Percival’s twin niece and nephew, Abbey and Barclay, and Roderick the raccoon, were cheering and clapping as the Veni Yan priest — Randolf Clearmeadow — performed some kind of magic trick.

Four more who had been chosen to help him with the Dreaming’s mission.

The priest reached out and seemed to pluck a coin from
behind Abbey’s ear. The little Bone began to laugh hysterically.

“Do I have any money behind my ear?” her brother asked, jumping up and down.

“And me?” Roderick chimed in.

Randolf chuckled. “No, but you can have these,” he said, producing three coins from somewhere within his tattered robes, and handing one to each of them. “For the marketplace, perhaps for something sweet.”

Abbey’s, Barclay’s, and Roderick’s eyes all grew large.

“Candy,” they said in unison.

A Bone explorer with a sky ship, an old Veni Yan warrior priest, a raccoon, and a set of Bone twins were not the most likely choices for a dangerous mission, but the Dreaming moved in mysterious ways.

A twelve-year-old turnip farmer wasn’t an obvious choice as leader, either, yet here he was.

And it got even weirder than that.

Tom continued to the far end of the Queen toward the ship’s anchor, only to find two large, snoring piles of fur. These were the least likely, and strangest members of their group, and they were sleeping on top of the anchor. Tom cleared his throat loudly, hoping to wake them.

The Rat Creatures continued to snore. He saw that one of them — nicknamed Stinky by Barclay Bone — was
clutching a dead squirrel to his hairy chest as he slept, like a small child with a doll.

It was certainly a contradiction to see the Rats this way. Rat Creatures, or Hairy Men, as many people called them, were considered to be some of the most dangerous and ruthless creatures in the Valley.

“Hey!” Tom poked Stinky’s leg with the toe of his boot. “Wake up!”

The Rat Creature snorted loudly. “Fredrick?” he mumbled. “Where’s Fredrick?”

For some reason, Stinky had named his dead squirrel Fredrick, and why he hadn’t eaten it yet was another mystery entirely.

“He’s right there on your chest,” Tom pointed out.

The Rat Creature sighed with relief as he lightly stroked the squirrel’s matted fur.
“There you are,” Stinky said, kissing the top of the dead rodent’s head. The Rat Creature then turned a suspicious eye toward Tom. “What do you want?” he snarled, holding the rotting carcass closer.

“I was wondering if . . .” Tom began, but did not get the chance to finish.

“No, you can’t have him!” Stinky screeched as he tried to hide the dead animal behind his back, kicking a clawed foot into the side of his still-sleeping companion. “Wake up! The young mammal wants to take Fredrick! Help!”

Smelly — named by Abbey Bone — awoke with a loud snort.

“Wha? Who?” the furry beast asked, looking around with unfocused eyes.

“The mammal!” Stinky wailed, pointing to Tom. “The mammal wants to take our beloved Fredrick. Do something!”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to take your squirrel,” he said.

Smelly leaned forward to study the boy. “You don’t want the squirrel?” he asked suspiciously.

Tom shook his head.

“He doesn’t want the squirrel,” Smelly said to Stinky.

“How can we be sure he’s telling the truth?” Stinky asked, still panicked. He’d brought Fredrick out from hiding and was petting the dead animal furiously.
“Are you sure you’re telling the truth?” Smelly asked. Tom nodded this time.

“He’s not lying,” Smelly told his friend. “Can I go back to sleep now?”

Stinky was about to answer, when Tom interrupted. “What I would like is for you two to move,” he said. “See!” Stinky cried. “He wants us to move. First we move and then he snatches away poor Fredrick and —”

“I need the anchor,” Tom said, pointing to the floor beneath the Rats. “You two are sitting on it.”

Both Rats looked down as they slowly lifted their furry rumps to find the heavy metal anchor beneath them. “Would you look at that,” Smelly said. “I thought the floor felt a little lumpy,” added Stinky, as the two creatures moved aside. “There, there, Fredrick,” Stinky cooed, petting the dead rodent. “I won’t let the bad mammal take you.”

“Do you see what I have to put up with?” Smelly asked the boy as Tom picked up the anchor from beside a coil of thick rope.

The Queen of the Sky had come to a stop, and Tom tossed the heavy metal anchor over the side. It hit the grass below with a thud.

“Anchor dropped!” he called out, ignoring Smelly and turning to head back to the wheelhouse. He caught sight of the final member of their party, Lorimar, a supernatural
being who had created a physical body for herself by using the plant life of the Valley. The woman stood perfectly still and stared out over the bow, the wind rustling the dark green oak leaves that comprised her hair.

It was Lorimar who had brought Tom the knowledge of the threat that endangered the Dreaming and the Waking World. It was she who told him that the Dreaming had chosen him.

Tom slowly approached her, curious as to what sight held her attention so raptly.

“Lorimar?” he called.

Coming to stand beside her, he looked out and saw only trees and mountains far off in the distance.

But he suspected that she was seeing so much more.
Lorimar had been reaching out to the worlds beyond the Waking one, desperate to see how bad it had become. It was far worse than she had expected. The Nacht’s power was growing, spreading over the lands, and now even the mighty Dragons were held in its monstrous grasp. Lorimar feared for them — and for their quest. She feared for the Valley and the wide world beyond.

Suddenly, there were voices calling to her from across the ether, soft and beckoning from very far away — voices that only she could hear. Momentarily distracted, she concentrated on the faint whispers that begged for her attention.

“Who are you?” she asked, addressing the voices in her mind. “Where are you?”

The answer made her want to cry out in shock and surprise.

_How is it possible?_ Her people were no more.

The First Folk had been destroyed when they tried to help the Dragons stop the Lord of the Locusts, who had possessed the flesh of the great Dragon Queen, Mim.

Lorimar had been the only survivor of her kind, or at least, until now, that was what she had believed.

Then, as suddenly as they had sounded, the voices fell silent. Lorimar desperately reached out, searching for them.
But they were indeed gone, and she felt more alone than she had in a very long time.

Tom reached out to touch Lorimar’s bark-covered arm.

“Lorimar?” he asked quietly. “Are you all right?”

The tree woman had been standing perfectly still, looking out over the Valley with an intensity that worried him. She shuddered at his touch, her leafy hair rustling as if combed by a sudden wind.

“Tom,” she said, turning her dark gaze to him. “What can I do for you?”

“What were you staring at?” He craned his neck to see if he could find anything out of the ordinary.

“I was assessing the danger to the Valley . . . to us,” Lorimar replied. “And I’m afraid to say that it is growing.”

“Then I guess it’s really good that we’re on this quest, huh?” Tom asked, the weight of his new responsibility like a sack of rocks around his neck.

“Yes,” she agreed, again gazing outward. “But even I am not sure if the threat has not grown too large for us. The Dragons are sleeping now, Tom. The *Dragons.*”

Tom didn’t know all that much about Dragons, but he knew that they were a powerful force in the Valley, and if *they* were under the Nacht’s influence, what chance could he and his small band possibly have?

No, he told himself. He couldn’t think like that. He
had to be positive. “Well, the Dragons might be asleep, but we’re not, and we’re going to stop the Nacht.”

She turned her head to him with a rustle of leaves, and he thought he saw the hint of a smile on her wooden features.

“Of course we are,” she said. “We must have faith in the power of the Dreaming.”

Just then, Percival came around the corner of the wheelhouse, adjusting the strap on a leather bag that he wore over his shoulder.

“There you are,” the Bone explorer said. “Are you ready? I’ve got the kids and the holy man ready to go.”

“Are you coming with us?” Tom asked Lorimar.

“Coming where?” she asked.

“We need supplies,” Percival answered.

“Yeah,” Tom chimed in. “Figured we should probably stock up if we’re going on a proper quest. Who knows when we’ll get the chance again.”

Lorimar gripped the railing in her branchlike hands.

“The Rats,” she began. “Will they be accompanying you?”

Tom and Percival turned to see the two Rat Creatures listening.

Stinky waved his dead squirrel at them.

“Not a chance,” Percival said.

“No,” Tom agreed, shaking his head.
“Then I shall stay here to keep an eye on them,” Lorimar said.

“That’s a good idea,” Percival said. “Still not sure I trust those two a hundred percent.”

Tom glanced over to see the Rats glaring at them, and then quickly looking away.

“Fine,” he heard Smelly say haughtily.

“We really didn’t want to go anyway . . . did we, Frederick?” Stinky asked his squirrel.

“It’s decided, then,” Percival said as he turned to leave. “Lorimar stays here with the hair ball twins, and we go get the supplies. Let’s shake a leg, Tom.”

“Are you sure?” Tom asked her, but she was already back to her place of stillness.

Lost, again, in thought.

Percival, Randolf, the twins, and Roderick had already gone down the rope ladder to the ground below.

Tom hesitated, first looking at the statuelike form of Lorimar still standing at the bow, and then to the Rats. He was a little nervous leaving Lorimar with the two beasts — she seemed far too distracted.

“C’mon, Tom,” he heard Percival yell.

“Yeah, Tom, let’s get going,” added Roderick.

Tom was about to go over the side of the Queen, but then stopped. Knowing that he’d be angry with himself if
he didn’t do this, he left the ladder and walked back toward the Rat Creatures.

“Yes, mammal?” Smelly asked as he stood before them. Stinky was slowly moving his prized dead animal behind his back.

“Just a warning,” Tom said, putting on his most serious face. He thought of his father, and how stern he could be at times, and tried to copy the look.

The Rat Creatures watched him with round, shiny eyes.

“You two better behave while we’re gone,” Tom said, looking from one to the other. “Because if you don’t . . .”

He didn’t know what to say after, and decided to just end it there.

The Rats were silent, obviously waiting for more, but Tom just turned his back and headed for the ladder. He had thrown one leg over the side of the sky ship, when Smelly finally asked, “If we’re not?”

“Yes,” Stinky wanted to know as well. “If we should misbehave, what fate will befall us?”

Tom paused, trying to come up with something really horrible to scare them, but he couldn’t think of anything right then.

“I really don’t want to say,” he said. “It’s just too horrible to talk about.”

The last thing he saw as he scrambled down the ladder was the two Rats clutching each other in fear. He hoped
that fear would keep them in line long enough for the others to complete their errands and return to the Queen.

“Everything good?” Percival asked as Tom reached the last rung and dropped to the ground.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Tom answered. “So what’s our plan?”

Tom felt Randolf’s intense stare upon him.

“What’s our plan?” the Veni Yan asked, seemingly in good humor, but Tom could tell that there was something else behind the warrior priest’s words. “I would assume that you, as leader of this . . . quest, would be telling us what the plan is . . . boy.”

Tom didn’t like the way Randolf said the word boy. It made him all the more aware of how unlikely it was that the Dreaming would choose him as leader of this strange band, and how much was dependent on him, and them, succeeding.

But the Dreaming had chosen him — he couldn’t argue with that. He really had only one choice: to lead the best he could.

Tom awkwardly cleared his throat before speaking. “Umm . . . we need supplies before we go on our quest,” Tom said. “So we’re going to go and get some.”

Everyone seemed okay with this, but it didn’t change the fact that it felt wrong. He was just a kid, after all . . . and there were adults here.
“Didn’t you say there was a village nearby, Randolf?” Tom asked.

The Veni Yan priest stared at him a moment with unreadable eyes, then turned and pointed off into the woods. “If I’m not mistaken, the village of Wolf’s Hollow is through those woods,” he explained. “I visited their market when still in service to the Veni Yan. We should be able to find everything we need there.”

Percival Bone flipped open the flap on his leather satchel and removed a wrinkled piece of paper. “I took the liberty of making out a shopping list,” he said. “First thing we need is potatoes — quite a few bushels if we want to keep the Queen’s propellers turning.”

“We wouldn’t need as many if Abbey and Roderick hadn’t used our supply as weapons,” Barclay was quick to point out.

“What else were we supposed to throw at the Rat Creatures?” Roderick asked, raising his paws up into the air. “And you were throwing them, too!”

“We shoulda thrown him,” Abbey snarled. “Besides, he and Roderick were eating them,” she said as she stepped menacingly toward her twin, her hands clenched into fists.

“That’s enough of that,” Percival said, getting between the perpetually quibbling siblings. He continued to read from the shopping list. “Some dried meats and fruit, maybe some more crackers and —”
“How are we going to pay for this?” Tom interrupted. Percival looked up.

“Well, I figured we might be able to barter,” the Bone said. He was looking inside his satchel again. “I always have a few items on hand from Boneville that the locals might be willing to trade for some goods.”

“And I managed to scrounge up a few coins,” Randolf added. He reached beneath his robes and produced a small leather pouch. “It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.” He emptied the contents into the palm of his hand and showed them.

Tom nodded. He was skeptical, but if it was all they had to work with, they’d have to make do.

“All right, then,” the leader of the quest said. “Let’s go and get ourselves some supplies.”