

HOUSE OF SECRETS

BATTLE OF THE BEASTS



Cordelia woke up on the floor in the living room. Next to her were Will, Eleanor and Brendan, also coming to. She blinked and got up on one elbow as she became conscious of a noise. It sounded like the cheers of a football game.

“Brendan?” she asked. “You okay?”

“The Wind Whacko knocked me out as soon as I walked in the front door,” he said, looking around. “Oh no, no... did she do it again?”

“That’s an affirmative,” said Will.

“She banished us?” asked Eleanor.

Brendan nodded. “Just like last time.”

“But last time the whole house got destroyed,” Eleanor pointed out. “This time she kept the furniture and everything else pretty much in place.”

"I can't believe she did this on a weekend," complained Brendan. "I'm not even getting to miss school."

"I'd like to know what world we've been sent to," said Will.

"Three of Kristoff's books again," said Cordelia. "I saw them right before I blacked out."

"Did you see the titles?"

"Couldn't make them out."

"Maybe we got sent to the same place as last time," Brendan said, "and now we have a serious advantage. We know how to deal with Slayne; we know how to handle the pirates—"

"But if it's like last time, doesn't that mean Will is going to fly in on a plane and save us?" Eleanor said. "That would make two Wills!"

"Two of me," Will said, intrigued by the idea. "Hmmm, that could be fortuitous."

"How's that?"

"Two strong, handsome leaders are better than one."

"One egomaniac is plenty," said Cordelia. "Besides, I think we've been sent somewhere new. Because what's that noise?"

“Yeah,” Eleanor said. They could still hear a crowd. Outside the house. “Are we in the middle of a football game?”

They all paused for a moment and listened. The sound of the crowd surrounded the entire house. But all the windows and shutters were closed. The Walkers and Will seemed trapped like mice in an experiment.

Cordelia headed for the nearest window. “Do we have a weapon?”

Will looked around, made fists. Eleanor did the same.

“*Fists?*” said Brendan. “Really? It sounds like there’s a thousand people out there, and what are we going to do, punch them?”

“Have you got a better idea?” asked Will.

Brendan paused, looked around, and picked up a small Japanese table lamp, holding it like a mini baseball bat.

“Of course,” said a sarcastic Will. “Lamps happen to be quite effective at stopping angry mobs.”

“Shut up, Will.”

“All right, let’s do this,” Cordelia ordered. She was about to open the window when she noticed Will staring at her. “What?”

“You’re taking charge. It suits you.”

"It's cute?"

"No. *It suits you.* But it *is* cute."

"Will, listen," Cordelia said, stepping away from the window. "I know I haven't been myself so maybe you forgot who you're dealing with. But I'm not interested in being trapped in mystical worlds for the rest of my life. I need to get back home, to go to school. So we're going to see what's out there, secure the house, get *The Book of Doom and Desire* as soon as possible, and get out. *No adventures.*"

"Yes, ma'am," Will said, saluting.

"I'm not an old lady, don't call me that."

"But wait, Deal," Eleanor said. "If we get the book, won't we be doing exactly what the Wind Witch wants us to do?"

"If it gets us home, Nell? I don't care."

Brendan was tired of everybody talking. He ran off and yanked open the window Cordelia was at, which usually had a gorgeous view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Then he stopped completely, frozen, at the incredible sight he was looking at.

At the same time, someone grabbed Cordelia's leg.

Eleanor pointed at the entrance to the living room.

"L... Li..."

Brendan stared out the window. “Guys? I think we’re in a...”

But he didn’t need to say it. Cordelia suddenly understood what the crowd noise was.

Facing her at the front of the living room, with its shoulders up and knotted, sniffing, was a full-grown lion.

“Oh my—” Cordelia started.

“How did that get in here?” Will yelled, flabbergasted.

“Hide!” said Eleanor.

Cordelia grabbed her sister and ran for the couch. But Brendan had no idea about the lion; he couldn’t even hear his sisters and Will yelling. He was completely engrossed by the incredible view outside.

He was looking at the Roman Colosseum.

From smack-dab in the centre of the arena.



The Colosseum was gorgeous, splendid, majestic. Giant outcroppings of stone held seats containing tens of thousands of people. It was like the Giants' baseball stadium in San Francisco, but so much older and more beautiful – in fact, it made that stadium look cheap. And Brendan was right where the pitcher's mound would be! This was the real deal: No one had gotten a chance to see the Colosseum this way for thousands of years, and here Brendan was, right in the middle of it.

He'd always wanted to see the Colosseum. There wasn't a cooler building in world history. When you were talking about ancient Rome, you were talking about plumbing, voting, and death by countless stab wounds... The Romans were the definition of "ahead of their time". And this building was the *one* place people always talked about when

they talked about Rome. It was like the Super Bowl and the Olympic Village rolled into one!

Brendan saw men in white togas in the stands, with some of the togas so white that they seemed to be bleached and hurt his eyes, and others with red stripes. There were a few purple togas, decorated with gold, but only the men who sat close to the arena wore them. There weren't any women, except in the nosebleed seats at the very top, where Brendan saw a few dressed in flowing robes that resembled what the Statue of Liberty wore.

Everyone was cheering at the top of their lungs, on their feet, pointing at Kristoff House. *And why wouldn't they? We just showed up in the middle of an event!*

Two deer were cornered with spears at one side of the arena, but the warriors holding the spears weren't paying attention to the deer any more. The animals leaped away. The warriors stared at Brendan with open mouths. *They're looking at the house!* Another group in tunics with bows and arrows were putting their weapons down, calling and pointing. Clearly some kind of mock hunt had been going on – but it was on hold for now.

Brendan's eye flicked to a man seated in what Brendan

would call one of the Colosseum's end zones, high up in a sealed-off box. *That has to be the emperor*, Brendan decided. The man wore a garish purple toga with a dash of white and a golden crown lined with sparkling jewels. He was extremely short, just over a metre tall, and nearly that wide. Soft and delicate, with eyes set too far apart and completely without hair, he stood and waved one hand at the crowd as if he were shooing away an insect.

The crowd went silent.

Man, Brendan thought, *that is one powerful dude*.

The man began to speak, but of course no one could hear him. He was one small (tiny, really) figure in a huge arena. So a manservant next to him stepped up to a giant bronze cone mounted on a tripod. The cone acted as a primitive megaphone, amplifying the manservant's voice throughout the Colosseum.

"Speaks Emperor Occipus the First!" the manservant declared. "Do not be frightened by this odd structure! It is the work of enemy sorcerers, a hell house conjured from Hades! But I, your emperor, will protect you. If there are monsters in the house, I will exterminate them! Send in another beast!"

Emperor Occipus, Brendan thought. *I've heard that name before....*

A metal gate below Emperor Occipus's box winched open. From the dark inside, two guards with helmets and whips emerged, leading out a lion.

"Uh-oh," Brendan said. "Uh, incoming, twelve o'clock..."

That was when he realised: He hadn't heard from his sisters or Will in a long time.

Brendan whirled around. What had he been doing? He'd just been geeking out about ancient Rome, completely forgetting that he was trapped here, in deep doo-doo—

He saw the lion in the living room. It was as big as the one outside, nosing at the cushions on the couch. Cordelia, Eleanor and Will were hiding behind that couch, completely still, trying not to breathe. But the lion had caught their scent; it jumped on the couch, sniffing for them.

Bren! Cordelia mouthed. Her face looked utterly terrified. Brendan hated to see her in such a panic. She had already been through so much. Couldn't somebody give them all a break? It wasn't fair to send a bunch of kids through these horrible problems. They would turn out disturbed, changed.

Do something! Cordelia mouthed.

Brendan had no idea what to do, but then he noticed two things: First, the lion didn't look like the healthiest specimen in Rome. It was thin, with ribs visible through its chest, and its mane was mangy and buzzing with flies. *It should probably be reported to the RSPCA*, Brendan thought.

The second thing he noticed was that he was still holding the Japanese lamp.

"Hey! You! Get outta here!" Brendan yelled.

He ran towards the lion, brandishing the lamp. He knew from the Discovery Channel that if people behave aggressively, a lot of wild animals get scared – people are big and they're hard to kill.

The lion, however, did not seem to understand this fact.

"RRRRRRAAAAGH!"

It jumped off the couch at Brendan, sharp claws extended, mouth wide open. Brendan froze, preparing for the excruciating pain of having his entire face bitten off – but at the last moment, Will leaped up from behind the couch and pulled him aside.

The lion landed by the Chester chair. Will dragged a stunned Brendan out of the room with Cordelia and Eleanor as the lion tore the chair's cushion to bits, sending

balls of white cotton flying through the air, like an indoor snowstorm.

“Why’s he so obsessed with that chair?” whispered Will.

“Uh... I hide pepperoni in that chair,” said Brendan.

Everyone looked at him.

“What? I hate pepperoni! You know that, Deal. I always ask you to order plain cheese, but *nooooo*! You have to get pepperoni!”

“How can you be so lazy? You know there’s this thing called compost—” said Cordelia.

“You’re not supposed to put meat in the compost, only vegetables—” said Eleanor.

“Guys, stop!” said Will. “We need to go before—”

“Hnuff.”

Will went quiet. The second lion, from outside, had entered the front door of the house and was walking towards them.

“Follow me!” Eleanor hissed, heading for the kitchen.

It was the only option. The first lion, swallowing a mouthful of moldy blue pepperoni, met the second lion in the hall and turned towards the kids. The Walkers and Will managed to close the door to the kitchen – but it was a swinging door; it wouldn’t lock! The lions charged down

the hall and burst into the kitchen as the kids dashed up the spiral stairs at the back of the room. The lions followed. The Walkers and Will were only a hair's breadth ahead of them – but the lions had difficulty navigating the curving steps. One slammed its head against the wall and shook its mane out, growling, as the other tried to leap over it and fell backwards, clawing at the steps like a cat trying to climb out of a bathtub.

The Walkers and Will reached the second floor and pulled the rope for the attic stairs. Then they went into Brendan's not-quite-a-man cave (Eleanor couldn't help scrunching her nose; it had that older-brother smell), turned back, and tried to yank up the stairs – but the lions were already climbing them!

The kids backed towards the far wall of the attic.

"We only have one option," Cordelia said, ripping a sheet off Brendan's San Francisco Giants desk calendar and grabbing a pen. "We have to summon the book."

"What?" Brendan asked. "*The* book? Isn't that the problem in the first place?"

"The Wind Witch was smart," said Cordelia, and Brendan noticed that she didn't look scared now. She looked

determined, driven, like a person who would do anything to save herself – no matter the cost. “She sent us to a place where we would immediately be in danger. And the only way to get out is to summon *The Book of Doom and Desire* and make a wish.”

“At which point she’ll swoop in and make us use it for *her*,” Brendan said.

“What other choice do we have?”

“We can’t let her near that book, Deal!”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens. Okay, you guys know how this works. To make the book appear, we have to think selfish thoughts. So, everybody! Go! Think the most selfish thoughts you can!”