

CHAPTER ONE

The taxi driver pressed the horn. Once, twice. Then a third time, just because.

‘Mum, you’re going to miss your flight!’ Alex propelled her mum towards the front door.

Mum bumped a small suitcase over the hall carpet. ‘I’ve left the number for the conference centre on the fridge, and my mobile will be on the whole time so call if anything comes up. I mean *anything*.’ Mum hovered in the doorway and looked from Alex to Grandpa Jacob. ‘Are you sure you’re going to be okay?’

‘We’ll be just fine,’ Grandpa Jacob said. ‘It’s only a week. You’ll go to your biology conference and dazzle them with your presentation. Alex will go to school, do all her homework, and not watch too much TV. She’ll water the indoor plants and have vegetables with dinner every night.’

Alex nodded emphatically. ‘You’re lucky you’re going away. It’ll be super boring here.’

Mum arched an eyebrow. ‘Why do I feel like I’m going to regret this?’

‘You’re not!’ Alex insisted. ‘I promise. Now hurry up, and go!’

Mum pulled her into a tight hug. ‘You be good for Grandpa Jacob. Don’t get into any trouble. And don’t forget to water the —’

‘Plants. I won’t. Promise.’

Grandpa Jacob and Alex waved from the front gate as the taxi pulled away and turned out of sight.

‘So what are we *really* going to do while Mum’s away?’ Alex asked, excited.

Grandpa Jacob frowned. ‘What do you mean “what are we really going to do”?’

Alex gave him a look. For her whole life, she had thought she was just an average kid. Nothing special whatsoever. Ordinary. But last summer, at Grandpa Jacob’s farm in Tasmania, Alex discovered she was anything but. She was the Fortieth Sun, gifted with a very special magic that ran through her blood. She was the *only person in the whole world* who could stop Kiala, the ancient spirit of destruction, from destroying the planet. Overnight, she went from being average-ordinary-Alex to unique-exceptional-Alex.

And she liked that.

A lot.

Yet since returning to Melbourne some months ago, Alex’s life had become boringly normal again. More school,

homework and chores, less saving the world. And this life — this ordinary life with the ordinary Alex doing ordinary things — wasn’t enough for her anymore.

‘For starters,’ Alex said, ‘we need to find out more about my Fortieth Sun powers.’

‘We certainly do not!’ Grandpa Jacob turned Alex by the shoulders and manoeuvred her back inside the house. ‘You have absolutely no need for them anymore. Thank goodness. That’s all done with.’ He went down the hall and into the kitchen. ‘So, you’re going to do exactly what your mum asked: Homework. Plants. Stay out of trouble.’

‘But —’

‘Alex, please.’ Grandpa Jacob’s voice was more serious now. ‘I have wasted over a decade pushing your mum away. This is my opportunity to make it up to her, and I’m not going to blow it. Now ...’ He consulted his list. ‘It’s nearly seven. Let’s get dinner on, shall we? And your mum said that you’re allowed to watch a movie tonight. What do you want to see?’

Alex harrumphed and flopped onto a chair. Seriously? A movie? That’s what *ordinary* eleven-year-olds did on a Friday night. ‘Can we at least do something fun tomorrow?’

Grandpa Jacob turned the oven on. ‘I’ve got an appointment at the museum in the morning. I’m seeing a curator I met “on the line”.’

Alex snorted a laugh. ‘It’s just “online”, Grandpa. One word.’

Since last summer, Grandpa Jacob had gone from not having ‘that Inter Net thing’ to enthusiastically joining the world of technology. He’d even started digitally archiving all of his old books and papers, which he thought was a ton of fun, and Alex thought was ... well, sometimes when she couldn’t sleep that’s what she contemplated.

‘Okay, okay. We met in an *online* chat forum for people interested in ancient civilisations.’ He pulled a tray of lasagne out of the fridge. ‘He’s got a piece in an upcoming exhibition he thinks I’ll want to see. You should come. It’ll be fascinating.’

Alex couldn’t think of anything *less* fascinating, but she was saved from answering by a loud ringing. Grandpa Jacob held the lasagne with one hand and extracted his mobile from his pocket. ‘Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?’

‘Mr Ortiz? I can see inside your ear.’ It was Leeuie, the kid who lived on the farm next to Grandpa Jacob. While Grandpa Jacob was away, he was keeping an eye on the place.

‘It’s a video call,’ Alex explained. ‘Hold the phone out so he can see us.’

Just because Grandpa Jacob *had* all the tech gadgets, didn’t mean he was a pro at using them.

Leeuie was in Grandpa Jacob’s kitchen. Four wooly heads crowded around him, filling the screen.

Grandpa Jacob groaned. ‘Leeuie, I told you not to let the alpacas inside!’

‘They just sort of barged in,’ Leeuie said, sheepish. ‘Sorry.’

‘We didn’t barge in,’ said Ollin, the alpaca with the black coat.

‘You stuck your foot in the door so it wouldn’t close then pushed past him,’ replied Lilly, the caramel-coloured alpaca. ‘That’s barging.’

‘No one forced you to follow me.’

Alvaro, the white alpaca, sighed. ‘Alex, please apologise to your grandfather on our behalf for entering his house uninvited. But we wanted to make sure he arrived safely. And these two —’ he gave Ollin and Lilly a look ‘— promised to save their bickering for the barn.’

‘We’re not bickering,’ Ollin and Lilly said at the same time.

Alex suppressed a smile, but Leeuie and Grandpa Jacob looked blank. Only Alex could understand the alpacas. It was another thing that made her special. To everyone else, the animals sounded like they were making standard alpaca noises.

‘Hi Alex. How’s Melbourne?’ asked Moraika, the chocolate-coloured alpaca.

‘Same as always,’ Alex said. ‘Boring.’

Ollin shoved his face closer to the screen. ‘What’s Jacob got there?’

‘Lasagne,’ Alex answered.

‘Lasagne.’ Ollin rolled the word around. ‘You think I’d like it?’

Alex was yet to find a food that Ollin didn’t like. ‘What’s going on in Tassie?’

Leeuie answered. 'Actually, that's why I'm calling. And it's good we're all here. Because ... well ... there's something ... a bit odd going on.'

That got everyone's attention.

'What kind of odd are we talking?' Moraika asked, and Alex translated.

'The not-so-great kind,' Leeuie said.

Grandpa Jacob groaned. 'Please don't tell me the caterpillars are back in the veggie garden already?'

'No. It's a bit worse than caterpillars. Actually ... a lot worse.'

Alex frowned. Leeuie sounded totally freaked out.

'Leeuie, what's happened?'

'It's Kiala.' Leeuie swallowed. 'I think she's ... awake.'

CHAPTER TWO

The alpacas all spoke at the same time.

'But how?'

'That's impossible!'

'Are you certain?'

'She can't be, surely.'

The teeniest shiver of excitement shot through Alex. She didn't want Kiala to escape — she wasn't *crazy* — but if she could use her Fortieth Sun powers again, then that was kind of awesome. 'What do you mean she's awake? How do you know?'

Leeuie flipped the screen so it showed a small olive sapling, which was potted in an old earthen bowl. The tiny tree was Kiala's prison. It lived on the windowsill of Grandpa Jacob's kitchen. In the mornings, the sun warmed the delicate green leaves and smooth branches. At night, moonlight bathed the plant, making it glow silver. It looked very pretty, sitting there by the window. But it made them all edgy. None of them could wait until the little tree was strong

enough to replant deep in the forest, far, far away from the house.

Far, far away from everything.

Alex squinted at the phone screen. She was no gardening expert, but the tree looked the same as it always did. Small, but healthy. You'd never imagine that the powerful spirit of destruction was imprisoned inside.

Grandpa Jacob peered through his glasses. 'It looks okay to me, but if you've noticed a change then you can always give the soil some fertiliser. If you pop into the back shed —'

'It's not the tree,' Leeuie interrupted. 'It's *around* the tree. Look.'

He moved the phone lower. Dead bugs and insects littered the windowsill, surrounding the sapling in a circle. It was almost as though a neat ring of poison was spread around the tree and anything that touched it curled up and died.

'It's gotten worse over the day,' Leeuie said. 'This morning, there was just one ant. I thought, whatever, a dead ant. But then this afternoon, there were more. A lot more ants. Spiders. Flies, as well. And now ... now it looks like that.'

'This is not good,' Alvaro murmured.

'There must be another explanation,' Grandpa Jacob said. 'Some kind of adverse reaction to a cleaning product?'

Alex gave him a look. This was no cleaning product disaster. 'I think Leeuie's right. Kiala's awake. Somehow, she

can reach outside her prison.'

'Does that mean the binding ritual didn't work?' Lilly asked.

Alex shook her head. The binding ritual *definitely* worked. They all saw the moment Kiala's spirit was sucked into the tiny sapling. They all felt the sense of peace and calm that descended on the forest straight afterwards. No, the binding ritual wasn't the issue, but ... 'What if the sapling is too small to hold Kiala?'

Leeuie nodded. 'That's what I was wondering, too. This tree is teeny. And she's ... well ... she's ...' he shuddered. 'She's pretty strong.'

Kiala could summon lightning storms and hurricanes. She could possess animals, control humans. Strong was an understatement.

The alpacas looked at the tiny sapling with its ring of dead bugs. 'It's possible,' Alvaro eventually said.

Moraika slowly nodded her head. 'Yes, it certainly is.'

'Makes sense to me,' Lilly said. 'Magic that strong needs to be contained by something stronger.'

'I guess that little tree doesn't cut it,' Ollin added with a sigh. 'And just when I was starting to relax and think about dinner.'

Grandpa Jacob and Leeuie looked to Alex for translation. 'They agree,' she said. 'The tree isn't strong enough.'

'So ... what do we do?' Leeuie asked.

'It's obvious,' Alex said. The prickle of excitement turned

into a constant fizz. ‘I need to put her into a bigger olive tree. A stronger one. I need to do the binding ritual again.’ It was all she could do to stop herself grinning. This is what she was waiting for. A chance to ignite the power inside her again.

‘Now just hold up a second,’ Grandpa Jacob said. ‘The binding ritual isn’t something that should be taken lightly.’

‘I’m not taking it lightly,’ Alex said. ‘But we need to do *something*, and this makes the most sense.’

Grandpa Jacob wasn’t sold. ‘I don’t know, Alex. It’s dangerous.’

‘It’s less dangerous than letting Kiala get stronger and stronger.’

‘But you don’t even know if a bigger olive tree will hold her!’

‘It will,’ Alex said with utmost certainty. It made perfect sense. Big magic needs a big prison. ‘But if anyone has a better idea ...?’

She looked at the group. One by one, the alpacas shook their heads, then Leeuie. And finally, Grandpa Jacob.

‘It’s the right thing to do,’ Alex said. ‘I know it.’

‘Well, we can’t just go to Tasmania,’ Grandpa Jacob said. ‘Your mother would never agree.’

Alex brushed his comment away. ‘We don’t need to. I still have all the binding ritual ingredients from last time. The feather, sand, volcanic rock, and obviously I have my own blood. I just need the tree here.’

Grandpa Jacob looked thoughtful. ‘I suppose I could ask

Leeuie’s parents if he can come over.’

‘They’ll agree,’ Leeuie said. ‘They keep yelling at me for getting in the way during harvest.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ Grandpa Jacob said quickly, even though it probably was.

‘You’ll have to book the ferry,’ Alex said. ‘I doubt the alpacas will be allowed on a plane.’

‘The alpacas?’ Grandpa Jacob spluttered. ‘You want the alpacas to come here?’

‘Yes!’ Ollin exclaimed. ‘I’ve heard the coffee in Melbourne is amazing. And there are these things called bagels — they’re like bread, but better! Oh, all the food there is meant to be incredible! I want to try everything!’

‘I’d love to see the city,’ Lilly said.

‘It would be quite an adventure,’ said Alvaro.

Moraika looked decidedly less enthusiastic, but she nodded. ‘If you need us, we’ll be there.’

‘Of course I need you,’ Alex said. ‘I can’t do the binding ritual without you here. What if something happened?’ Even though the alpacas looked kind of goofy and cute, deep down they had formidable warrior roots. If there was going to be a battle, Alex wanted them by her side.

Grandpa Jacob glanced about. ‘Where would they stay?’

Alex shrugged. ‘There’s a shed in the back garden. Or they could just sleep in the living room.’

‘If your mother ever found out —’

‘She won’t,’ Alex said. She turned back to Leeuie. ‘Do

you know anyone with a horse float?’

‘My parents have one they don’t use anymore.’

‘You think they’d drive it to the ferry and load it on board? We could meet you at this end and tow it off, then bring you all back here.’

Leeuie nodded. ‘If it got me out from “under their feet” — he made air quotes with his fingers — ‘they’d say yes to anything.’

Alex could sense her grandfather wavering.

‘Let’s take a vote,’ Alex said. ‘Who thinks you should bring the tree over ASAP so that I can perform the binding ritual again and transfer Kiala’s spirit into a bigger olive tree?’ She put her hand in the air.

Ollin lifted a foot. ‘As long as there’s time for some culinary sightseeing afterwards.’

‘I’m keen,’ Lilly said.

Alvaro and Moraika glanced at each other, then both nodded.

‘I’m in,’ Leeuie said, his face alight with excitement.

All eyes were on Grandpa Jacob now. He scrubbed a hand through his greying hair. ‘I suppose it does make sense. But I want to do everything by the book. No surprises.’

‘No surprises,’ Alex promised. She grinned at Leeuie and the alpacas. ‘Pack your bags. You’re coming to Melbourne.’

CHAPTER THREE

If Alex thought the spirit of destruction waking up would make Grandpa Jacob rethink his trip to the museum, she was mistaken.

‘It’ll take our minds off Kiala while we wait for the others to arrive,’ he insisted, as they caught the tram a few short stops to the museum. ‘Dr Juniper is the world’s foremost expert on ancient civilisations. He’s even heard of the Chodzanar. Can you believe it?’

Alex lowered her voice. ‘So, he knows about Kiala?’

Grandpa Jacob shook his head. ‘Oh no. Only a little history about the tribe. There are artefacts that turn up every now and again that can be linked to them. We’ve had some very interesting discussions about their lifestyle and ...’

Alex tuned out. If this wasn’t to do with Kiala, she wasn’t interested. She smothered a yawn. Today was going to be a long day.

The museum was a big modern-looking building, all concrete and glass and sharp angles. The security guard at

the front desk told them to wait while he called ahead to the curator.

Before long, a man strode towards them, smiling. ‘Mr Ortiz?’

Alex was expecting someone like her grandfather, but this guy was much younger. He was still old, but not *old* old. Probably similar to her mum’s age. And he had on ripped black jeans and a leather jacket. He looked almost ... cool.

‘Dr Juniper, it’s wonderful to meet you *offline*.’ Grandpa Jacob winked at Alex, and she almost died of embarrassment.

‘Call me Griffin, please.’ He extended a hand to Grandpa Jacob.

Grandpa Jacob shook it enthusiastically. ‘Your paper on the decline of Ancestral Puebloans was fascinating.’

‘Not as fascinating as your theory about the Mayan Empire. Now *that* was some scintillating stuff.’

Grandpa Jacob went pink with pride.

‘And you must be Alex.’ Dr Juniper gave her a wide smile. ‘Come on, you’re going to love what I’ve got to show you!’

They followed Dr Juniper through the cavernous foyer. A couple of people in high-vis vests were up ladders, attaching large banners to the ceiling. *LOST CIVILISATIONS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE*.

‘We open the exhibition in a week,’ he said, as Alex and Grandpa Jacob clipped visitors’ badges to their jackets, ‘but this way you can get an up-close look at some of the artefacts

before they go on display. There’s one in particular that I think you’ll find fascinating.’

Dr Juniper led them to a nondescript door and swiped a control panel with a keycard. Behind that was a corridor with a couple of elevators at the end. Another swipe of the keycard and they were heading into the basement of the museum. ‘Down here is where the real magic happens. Restoration, preservation, carbon dating ... all the fun stuff.’

Alex suspected her definition of ‘fun’ was very different to theirs.

The elevator pinged and they followed Dr Juniper out. He kept a brisk pace, turning this way and that through a maze of corridors with flickering fluorescent lights and bland blue carpet.

‘I’d get lost down here,’ Grandpa Jacob said. ‘Everything looks the same.’

‘Spend enough time and you start to notice the little things. Like the carpet here has a slight stain where someone spilled coffee. The wall back there has a chunk taken out from when we were setting up a sword exhibition.’ He stopped outside a door that looked exactly the same as all the others. ‘See down there? There’s a scuff mark because sometimes my card doesn’t work and I end up kicking the door, not realising it’s still locked.’

His card worked on the third try and he ushered them in. The room was bigger than Alex expected and lined with metal shelves, which housed boxes and envelopes and tubs

— all neatly tagged and arranged. Dr Juniper swept his hand around the room. ‘We’ve got everything down here. Funerary artefacts, ancient jewellery, weapons ...’ He grinned. ‘But here’s what I really wanted you to see.’

He pulled on white cotton gloves then handed a pair each to Alex and Grandpa Jacob. From a shelf near the back, he picked out one of the boxes. He lifted the lid and reached into the padded interior, extracting a small dark-grey metal box, about the size of a Rubik’s cube. He handed it oh-so-gently to Grandpa Jacob.

Alex hoped this ‘fascinating artefact’ would at least have something to do with the weapons of armies long gone or jewellery worn by ancient royals. But nothing about it looked special. She smothered another yawn.

‘Is it ...?’ Grandpa Jacob looked at it, curiously. ‘It’s an Oroto, isn’t it?’ He examined the top, where a spiral was etched into the metal. ‘Does this spiral mean something?’

‘I’m not sure exactly,’ Dr Juniper said. ‘Depending on who you ask, spirals can represent everything from rebirth to eternal life to a transmission of energy. But that’s not the interesting thing about it ...’ He beamed. ‘Turn it over. Look at the bottom.’

Carefully, Grandpa Jacob upended the cube. He peered closer. Then, he froze. When he spoke again, his voice was croaky. ‘Where did you get this?’

Alex stood on tiptoes to try and see what the fuss was about. Grandpa Jacob held it down to her eye level. At first,

Alex was confused. Yep, it was still a metal box. Grey and old looking. Wholly unremarkable.

‘Look closer,’ Grandpa Jacob said, his voice serious.

Alex leaned in. Then, she sucked in a breath.

The lines of the symbol were so faint they were almost invisible. She had to squint to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her. A chunky cross with small triangles at the end of each arm, all surrounded by a circle.

The Amarlysa.

The symbol that represented the Chodzanar tribe.

‘Isn’t it wild!’ Dr Juniper said. ‘I procured it on a recent trip to California. It turned up in the aftermath of an earthquake and the local authorities didn’t know what to make of it — it clearly wasn’t a Native American artefact — so they loaned it to me to include in the exhibition here.’

Grandpa Jacob shook his head, confused. ‘California?’

‘I know!’ Dr Juniper laughed. ‘What on earth is an Oroto from the Chodzanar tribe doing all the way up in California? It makes no sense. But the age matches. We couldn’t use radiocarbon dating on metal, of course. So we used tephrochronology and magnetostratigraphy techniques to figure out the age of the sediment layers around it and found it dates back almost a thousand years.’

Alex’s head swam. Not because of the unpronounceable words, but because this box was from around the same time that Kiala was imprisoned in her original olive tree.

Dr Juniper gave her a strange look. ‘Are you okay, Alex?’

‘What? Oh, yeah, I’m fine.’ She tried to arrange her features so she didn’t look so shell-shocked.

Dr Juniper continued. ‘Have you heard of the Chodzanar travelling outside of South America?’

Grandpa Jacob hesitated, then shook his head. It wasn’t true, of course. He knew very well that four Chodzanar warriors travelled to Tasmania many centuries ago with a deadly cargo: Kiala, the spirit of destruction.

‘I have two hypotheses.’ Dr Juniper’s eyes were bright with excitement. ‘That the Chodzanar either travelled way further north than we originally thought, or that a group of people from California were gifted the Orotos when they went south and brought it back home with them.’

He kept saying the word ‘Orotos’, but Alex had no idea what it meant. ‘What is an Orotos?’

Grandpa Jacob answered. ‘It’s a sort of ... talisman, I suppose, created to control evil spirits.’

Alex tried to keep her surprise in check. ‘Seriously?’

Dr Juniper nodded in agreement. ‘Absolutely. Many tribes from around the Andes believed these boxes could “trap” evil spirits so they wouldn’t attack the villages.’

Alex’s heart almost beat out of her chest. ‘You’re telling me this is a box designed to *trap evil spirits*?’

‘There’s absolutely no evidence that they did what was advertised,’ Grandpa Jacob said quickly, and very pointedly. ‘Orotos are trinkets. Ornaments to make people feel safer. Like carrying garlic if you’re worried about vampires.’

‘That’s very true,’ Dr Juniper said. ‘Boxes to trap spirits are pretty far-fetched. Still, that’s what they believed, back then.’

Alex could tell him about a few other things that might have seemed pretty far-fetched, but she kept those to herself. She scrutinised the curator. Did he know more than he was letting on? Did he know about Kiala? He didn’t *seem* like he was hiding anything. He just seemed thrilled to find someone as enthusiastic about old stuff as her grandfather was.

But if he was right about what this artefact was, and what it could do, then this could be the key to stopping Kiala for good! Alex cleared her throat and, keeping her voice casual, she asked, ‘So ... is there anything inside it?’

Dr Juniper shook his head. ‘We did testing and it’s empty.’

‘Would you be able to tell if there really was a spirit in there?’

‘Alex,’ Grandpa Jacob said. His tone was sharp and his gaze told her to drop it.

Alex ignored him. ‘Could you?’

Dr Juniper shrugged. ‘Well, I mean, there aren’t really evil spirits going around and terrorising villages —’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know. But, hypothetically speaking, are there tests you can do to tell if something like that is in there?’ Alex recalled what Kiala’s spirit had looked like. Translucent and foggy. Like she was made of smoke and

vapour. 'Could you test if it was full of gas or something?'

'Of course. We always test for the possibility of any gasses or gas-like substances inside ancient artefacts. But this showed no signs of anything like that.'

Alex swallowed. 'And, ah, do you know how it works?'

The curator just laughed. 'Well, people back then believed a lot of things that have since been disproved, so I don't think it really "worked" in the way they wanted it to.' He nodded to the box. 'You can hold it if you want to.'

The Orotu was lighter than Alex expected. It weighed almost nothing. But as soon as Grandpa Jacob placed the metal cube in her gloved hands, tiny prickles of energy sparkled into her fingertips, through her palms, and up her arms. Like a thousand tiny butterfly feet dancing on her skin. Alex's breath caught. This box was imbued with some kind of ancient magic, she could feel it.

This is it, she thought. This is how we stop Kiala, for good!

Now, she just needed a way to get it out of here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alex barely heard a word Dr Juniper said for the rest of the visit. As soon as they were back outside the front doors of the museum, Alex turned to her grandfather.

He took one look at her expression. 'Oh, no. No, no, no.' He started to walk back to the tram stop. 'Absolutely not.'

Alex raced after him. 'What if you just *talked* to him? Asked if we could borrow it?'

Grandpa Jacob didn't slow. 'We are not going to risk freeing Kiala and putting her into an ... an ... ornament! Alex, come on! It's far too dangerous!'

'But what if it's the *only way* to stop her, for good!'

'I already told you: there's absolutely no evidence that those things were any more than trinkets created to make people feel safer.'

'This one's different,' Alex protested. 'Didn't you feel it?'

'Feel what?'

'The tingling ...' Alex thought of how to explain. 'Like it