

The Adima Chronicles

# ADIMA RISING

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# Absolute Love Publishing

**The Adima Chronicles: Adima Rising**

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## **Dedication**

To my heart I hold dear... Becky, who loved the story from early on and encouraged me to continue.

And to my beloved...always to my beloved.

## **Acknowledgments**

This has been a long process since nature first whispered in my ear that there was a job to do. Many have helped. Clemente and Delaney Jayne gave useful information and an important perspective early on. Bobby Trice also gave useful feedback. Heather was instrumental in opening the doorways to let the messages come through. Erica has provided encouragement and friendship for many years and provided a solid affirmation of the usefulness of the book. Denise Little provided an essential boost at a critical time. Thanks to Cheryl Curtis for friendship, suggestions, and being my black beard even though it required reading an early, rough draft. A special thanks to my publisher at Absolute Love Publishing, Caroline Shearer, and my editor, Sarah Hackley.

## Pronunciation Guide

Belecha: Bell – a –**ha**(but with a little snort to the ha, like Bach)

**Kiva:** **key**– va (rhymes with diva)

**Techta:** **Tech**(ch sounds like the ck in Back) – ta; means “little toad”

Kroledutz: Crow – la –**Dūtz**(u like goo)

Pelcha:**Pel**– ha (with a ch sound like Bach); means “prairie dogs”

Tinglen:**Ting**– len; Billy’s name

Pecheme: Peck – ě –may; James’ name

Heliotom:**He**– Lee – ā – tome; Tima’s name

Adima:**ǎ**– dim – ǎ

Radelam: Rad – a –**lam**(like calm or bomb)

Sodrol: So –**drawl**(roll the r a bit)

Mealim: May – a –**lim**(with hints of a double e, like seem)

Oloho: **Ō** –**low**– ho

Arnalea: Ar – na –**lie**- ǎ

Atomasa: ǎ – toe –**mǎ**–sa

Heyatoma: Hey – a –**tome**(like home) – ǎ

Eliaya: El – ee –**eye**– ya; means “beautiful patterns”

## Chapter 1

The chill bit through Rory's jacket. At night, the desert air cooled quickly. He scowled and tossed another stone. "This sucks," he sighed.

Tonight was supposed to be special. After a childhood spent moving from one archaeological dig to another, Rory's family had finally settled down in one place. Rory finally had friends, real friends who he wouldn't have to leave before the next year started. Friends who didn't see him as just the short, stocky, weird kid who hated sports and had two dads. Friends who he could finally share his ritual with.

Rory looked around at the empty pit and shook his head. Camping by himself was not what he had in mind for an end-of-the-school-year party.

Sure, they had excuses. People who disappoint you always do. Billy was grounded ...again. Tima's mom was freaked about something ... again. James bailed as soon as he heard Tima wasn't coming. Nothing new. End of 9th grade and all alone. Just like the end of every other grade. Different place ... same story.

Why not bag it and go home? A snack. A real bed. It'd sure be more comfortable. He hesitated. The letter from his mom had come that afternoon.

It'd been nine years since Rory had seen her. Nine years since she'd gotten tired of hopping from dig to dig and country and country, making up stories with Rory while his dad spent the days excavating ruins with grad students. She'd left when he was five.

Months had passed since she had so much as called, and now, all of a sudden, she wanted a son. Rory wasn't buying it, but his dad said she might win in court. He was probably talking to the lawyer now, trying to stay calm, and figure out what to do.

*This is better than listening to all that, thought Rory. Even if I am alone. He looked down into the pit. At least the hole isn't too bad. Turned out pretty good, actually. Maybe the best one yet.*

Every year since his mother had left, whenever they got to a new dig, Rory would find the place he felt was right and start a hole. He didn't really know why he was digging, except that everyone else was digging and he wanted something of his own. As he grew, he got better at digging and planning, knowing how to make the right shape and get the sides nice and straight. That's when he developed the ritual.

The first night the hole was deeper than he was tall, he'd build a fire at the bottom and he'd spend the night. He'd watch the stars and the sunrise, and celebrate his accomplishment. The first time he did it, he was only seven. Dad had tried to talk him out of it, but he couldn't. The next morning, Rory had felt spectacular. He'd done it every year since except one – the year of jungle fever - when he and Dad got so sick they couldn't get out of bed for two weeks and couldn't do much for two more weeks after that. That was the year they had met Leon.

Officially the camp cook, Leon had spent a month nursing Rory and his dad back to health. When they went back to the States, to the visiting professor job Dad always took as he wrote up his findings and planned the next expedition, Leon came along, moving not only into the house, but into Dad's room. It had taken Rory a while to get used to the idea of having two dads, but now it was just how things were. The only time Rory regretted living with his dad was at the beginning of the school year. Every year it was a new school, a whole school full of kids he didn't know, and every year he was the new kid trying to make new friends.

It wasn't easy. Until this year. This year, they weren't moving on again. The knowledge that he'd get to stick around for longer than a few months had set Rory's mind at ease, and he'd made friends much more quickly. This year, he still dug his hole, but this time it was in his country and he hadn't dug it alone.

And he wasn't supposed to be celebrating alone either, except they had all canceled.

Rory stared at the cracked screen of his phone. He had figured Billy would be in trouble. Billy was always in trouble, but he didn't think it would stop him. First day of school, when Rory was sitting out under some cottonwoods, cold and hungry, but not wanting to go inside to the cafeteria and deal with all the faces he didn't know, this short blond kid had come over, sat down with a grin, and tossed him half a burrito.

"Hey there," he'd said, his green eyes twinkling. "I figured, before everyone else warns you to stay away from the eeevil Billy Fuller, I'd come over and say hi. Have a burrito. I made it myself, and I'm a pretty good cook." Pausing for a moment, he'd added, "You really got two dads?"

Rory had sighed and looked back at Billy, hoping this wasn't some weird way to start a fight. The kid was smaller than him but wiry. He looked like he'd been in some scrapes, and could hold his own in a fight. Rory was a good fighter because he was strong, and he had a lot of experience winning fights, but he was sick of fighting. Still, he wasn't going to let some smart-mouth kid talk bad about his dad and Leon.

"Yeah," said Rory, staring hard at Billy. "I got two dads. What of it? I'm thinking about getting a hamster, too, but I haven't decided. You got an opinion you want to share?"

Billy grinned. "Huh. Neat. So, do they both try to tell you what to do or can you play 'em against each other? That's what I'd do. The fathers I mean. I'd just ignore anything a hamster tells me to do." Still smiling, he shook his head. "If you listen to hamsters, it's all over for you, man." Then, he gestured with his half of the burrito to Rory's. "Eat. It ain't poison."

Rory shook his head. "Leon and my dad are like a tag team match. Can't play them off each other. No way. Believe me, I've tried. Big mistake." Looking closely at Billy, he added, "Why are you evil?"

Billy shrugged. "I ask too many questions. Plus, my ma is the town drunk ... or at least one of 'em. I don't mind saying it, and I don't really mind when others say it, but I also don't mind saying what everyone else is too. Most people don't like that." He took a big bite of his burrito

and eyed Rory's. "Look: Are you gonna eat that burrito or not? I didn't spit in it. Promise. But if you're too delicate, hand it over. I'll eat it myself."

Rory grinned in spite of himself. He took a bite of the burrito and his eyes started to close. It was one of the best burritos he'd ever tasted and that was saying a lot, since Leon was a master in the kitchen. Rory chewed and swallowed. He opened his eyes and found Billy staring at him with a smile.

"Good. Right?"

Rory nodded. "Most definitely good."

Billy grinned. "The secret is the beans. I make my own beans." He lowered his voice and looked around, like he was divulging a state secret. "That's what gives it the special taste. The way I give the beans that flavor is I pre-fart them. You see, beans always give you the farts, so I figure, you eat some cabbage and chilies while you're cookin' the beans and that gives you the mucho gas. Then, every hour, I lift the lid and let a whole volley of farts loose on the beans. Gives 'em that perfect flavor."

Rory stared at Billy, a mouthful of burrito half eaten in his mouth, not sure whether to spit it out or bust up laughing. Billy finished his half, wiped his fingers on his jeans and lay back, looking at the sky. "I was thinking of selling them at the county fair. Don't know if I should call 'em Billy's Butt Blasted Burritos or Fuller's Fart Fluffed Yummies. What do you think?" He sat up and stared at Rory with a completely serious look on his face, like Rory's answer would change the world.

Rory finished chewing, swallowed, and considered. "What about Burritos Especial? No need to bring your butt into the picture." He grinned. "And if you decided to put a graphic on the side ... somehow, I don't think you'd increase sales by ..."

Billy raised an eyebrow. "You'll never know. Might be the purtiest butt around."

Rory shook his head, laughing. "Don't care. Not the connection you want to make to sell the product."

By that time, lunch was over and Rory had his first friend. Billy spent plenty of time at Rory's house. He wasn't that interested in Javier's archaeology, but when Leon was cooking, Billy was there helping. He also helped Rory do and finally understand math. Billy had a way of describing, then making him work the problems, that made it make sense. When Rory went up the hill to dig, Billy would help, constantly asking questions and making suggestions. Billy and Rory ate lunch together most days, usually sitting outside, Billy talking nonstop about other kids or teachers or whatever program he was currently obsessed with and Rory throwing in a quip every now and then. But now he wasn't here.

Rory stood on the lip of the hole and considered. Maybe he should just go back home and try this some other night. Tonight wasn't going to be what he had hoped for. It was going to be just him – like always. First night had always been special. He didn't want to be pissed off. That would

ruin it. Then he thought again about what he had left at home. *Nah, this is better than dealing with that*, he thought.

Rory jumped down into the hole and lit the fire. It caught quickly and soon the pinion sap was bubbling, letting loose one of Rory's favorite smells. Inhaling with pleasure, he sat back against the rocky side of the hole and watched the smoke rise up toward the stars. Slowly, he started to relax. So what if no one came. This was good.

Rory looked again at their handiwork. The hole was deep and wide, with good, straight walls. He and his friends had dug and carried and hacked the hard earth for months, and now it was finished. Over seven feet across, nearly six feet deep, with a flat sand floor.

"I'll make a ladder with that lumber in the shed next week," he said. "Then it will be finished."

An owl hooted, scaring dinner out of hiding. Rory laid his head back against the hard packed dirt wall and closed his eyes.

"Arr iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!" A dark form dropped down from above, a deep growl rising to a scream as it reared up, long arms reaching.

Rory's head jerked forward, then back, and slammed against the wall. "Oww!"

Then he saw his attacker. "Billy! You jerk!" Rory rubbed his head and glared. Billy snorted. "Mess your pants, Compadre?"

"No, but I got a nice lump, butt head. How'd you get out? I thought you were grounded for life."

"Life wasn't all that long this time. Suzie called an hour ago. She got in trouble up in Denver and Mommy ran right out to save her baby from the evil police." He grinned. "Of course I promised to stay home and think about what I had done." Rory

cocked his head. "What did you do this time?"

Billy grinned. "Can't remember. Oh, wait. There was something about Ms. Horselick and a portrait in my math book."

"You missed one?"

"Front cover. I forgot to take the book jacket off. She did and ..."

Rory hooted.

"She's gonna make me buy a new one. \$50!"

From above them, a sharp voice barked, “You two wanna keep it down? I thought the plan was to enjoy the quiet of the desert. If I wanted to hear brainless boys babbling, I’d have stayed home and watched the news.”

Rory and Billy looked up. Tima stared down at them, hands on her hips, her face holding back a twisted smile.

Tima had plunked herself down at the table next to Rory in history class during his first week at school. A good head taller than Rory, with beautiful, curly, black hair and a self-assured manner, she would have been intimidating were it not for her sparkling smile.

“You moved in down the block from me and my mom,” she’d said. “I’m Tima.” Then, she stuck out her hand. Rory wasn’t used to talking right away and wasn’t used to shaking hands with other kids, but Tima had a way of making anything she did seem like it was just the way things were done. So, he shook her hand.

“Tima?” he asked.

She nodded. “Short for Septima. Mom named me after Septima Clark.”

Rory tilted his head, questioning.

Tima laughed and waved dismissively. “Look her up. She’s the teacher, not me.” Then she shot him a fiery look. “I mean it. I’ll ask you again. You better have an answer.” She smiled a slow grin, but Rory wasn’t going to test whether she’d make good on her implied threat. He’d looked up Septima Poinsette Clark when he got home.

A couple of weeks after Rory had started to dig the hole, he looked up from swinging the pick to break up the gravel-studded earth and found Tima sitting on the growing pile of dirt.

“What are you doing, Rory?” she’d asked.

“Digging a hole,” he replied, panting, glad to have a break. The pick was heavy, but it was the only thing that busted up the dirt into small enough chunks that he could haul it away.

Tima nodded and cocked her head. “What’s a citizenship school?” No explanation, no expression, just the question hanging in the air.

Rory considered Tima, sitting so calmly on the growing pile of dirt and rocks. “What do I get if I know the answer?”

Tima cracked her knuckles. “Better to ask what happens if you don’t.”

Rory thought some more about whether or not Tima was someone he wanted as a friend, then nodded. “A school in the South that taught people how to teach other people how to read, write, and do math. They needed to do that because most Southern states had a literacy requirement to try to keep African Americans from voting. Septima Clark ran the education and teaching program that ran the citizenship schools.” He winked, and then returned to slamming the pick

into the ground and wrenching up big hunks of rock-studded earth. Tima simply stood up, picked up a shovel, and started shoveling dirt into the wheelbarrow.

They had worked together the rest of the day. From then on, Tima often came up the hill and pitched in. If Billy was there, they'd split up the tasks – Rory with the pick, Billy with the shovel, and Tima hauling dirt. Once the hole got too deep for the wheelbarrow, it went slower. They had to haul the dirt out with the bucket. One day, about a month later, when it was just Rory and Tima, and they were heading down the hill after an afternoon of digging, Tima turned to him.

“Rory?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you digging a hole?”

Rory shook his head. “I don't know. It's just something I do.”

Tima thought about that a moment and nodded her head. “Well, okay then.” She kept walking.

“Okay what?” Rory asked.

Tima stopped and looked at him. “If that's good enough for you, it's good enough for me. See you tomorrow, Rory.” Then she turned off toward her house.

Rory had stared after her, amazed that someone would help him day after day just because it mattered to him. He'd never had friends like that before.

## Chapter 2

Tima stood on the lip of the hole, looking back and forth from Billy to Rory. She scanned the desert around the hole, nodded to herself that no one was around and leapt with the poise of an athlete down in front of them. “What happened? I heard someone scream.”

Billy nodded. “Yeah, some little girl saw a shadow and wet her pants. She ran home to change.”

Tima punched him in the arm. “No girl screams like that. That was a widdle boy if I ever heard one. Seeing as you’re here, I understand why. I nearly scream every time I catch your face full-on. You probably popped out and Rory didn’t have a chance to look away. Lucky he’s not blind.”

Billy started to reply, but Tima held up her hand, pulled her phone out, and dialed. She spoke sharply. “James. Get dressed and get up the hill. We’re all here. Yes, I know what time it is. It’s time for you to get your buns in gear.” She put her hand on her hip and tapped her foot against the packed sand while he responded. “James Nomura, you are not going back to sleep. If I don’t see you walking out your back door before I count to 10, I’m coming to get you. And you know I will.” James was still explaining why he couldn’t come when Tima hung up and faced the two. “He says he’ll be right up.”

Rory couldn’t help grinning. This was getting better and better. “But I thought you ...”

Tima brushed that away. “Mom’s already asleep. She gets nervous. Then she gets over it. I left a note. It’s all good.” Tima’s mom was a writer. “She just got trapped in a story. When she gets stuck, she gets depressed, and that makes her more stuck.”

Tima didn’t talk much about her mom’s problems to anyone except James. Rory had asked her about it a couple of times, but Tima didn’t want to get into details.

“No worries,” she’d said. “It isn’t like I’m burying it. I have a therapist I talk to. Mom has a therapist. I talk to James and his mom. I’m handling it. It is what it is.”

“Besides,” she’d added, wiggling her eyebrows, “Every family has something.”

Rory had let it drop. He knew better than just about anyone how tiring it got to explain about families.

Tima and James were a pair – not boyfriend and girlfriend – but where there was one, the other was usually within easy reach. It was a funny match. James, with his glasses, lanky build, and orderly ways, was as quiet as Tima was loud. A third-generation farm boy, James was more comfortable with cows and herbs than people. Tima was an artist, and she painted wild swirls of color and texture on huge canvases, rocks, timbers, and nearly anything else that took her fancy. After the day’s chores, Tima would usually go to James’ house and they’d do homework together or sit and talk.

Tima had introduced Rory and James, but James hadn’t done much digging on the hole. “Sorry, Rory,” he’d said, even though Rory had never asked. “I spend all day digging, so coming up here

in the afternoon to dig a hole ... It just doesn't work for me. If you really like digging, though, feel free to come on down the hill. We're putting in a new field of peppers."

Rory had taken him at his word, and never expected to see him at the hole. One afternoon, though, after they'd started hauling the dirt out with the bucket, Rory had found James busy next to the hole with a tripod, a pulley, some rope, and a post-hole digger. Rory had already learned that James was a wait-and-see guy, so that's what Rory did.

Within the hour, they had a well-designed system for raising dirt by the bucketful and swinging it over to the growing hill of rock and dirt. James had tested it a couple of times, smiled, and nodded to Rory. "See you later. Time to irrigate the corn." Then he'd headed down the hill, waving without turning back around in response to Rory's surprised, "Hey, thanks!"

James had called to cancel a few minutes after Tima had called to say her mother was having one of her moods. Rory had known James would cancel. He was even more certain that even if James was asleep when Tima commanded, he would be heading up the hill toward them in 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... BANG. They all heard James' back door slam and knew he was trudging up the hill to join them. Rory smiled. From all no-shows to everyone here in a just a few minutes.

How great was that? New Mexico was going to turn out all right after all.

Tima looked around and nodded. "Most excellent. Billy, pump up that fire. Look at you. Did you just wear that raggedy hoodie? You know it gets cold at night. Here – I figured as much." She threw a wild-colored, woolen thing at him, and Billy, who would have stepped aside and let the thing fall into the fire had it been anyone else, caught it and pulled it over his head without a single comment about how much it looked like it had been rolled in one of her paintings. With Tima, and only Tima, Billy minded.

Tima looked around. "Okay. Who's got eats?"

Rory pulled out his pack. "Leon cooked a bunch of stuff."

Tima grabbed and started pulling out goodies. "Look at all this! You and your dad must be scarfin' all the time."

Everyone dug in while the pinion sap in the logs popped and sent showers of sparks up toward the amazing spread of stars. James dropped down from the side, grumpy at first, but cheering up when he saw the spread of munchies.

"You called right after I finally went to bed," he said. "Dad got home late. There was almost a riot at the council meeting."

Billy perked up. "Really? I always thought those meetings were snooze fests. Anyone get punched?"

James shook his head. "Nah, Dad threatened to have the sheriff start giving tickets for disturbing the peace. \$50 a pop." James smiled. "Amazing how people shut up when talking costs them something."

Tima nodded. “What caused the fight?”

“Some guy named Cisco bought Rattlesnake Ranch and wants to change the zoning so he can build a kiddie park to lure tourists off the interstate.”

“What’s Rattlesnake Ranch?” asked Rory.

“It’s that boarded up tourist trap on the edge of town,” replied Tima. “It closed years ago.” Turning to James, she asked, “Why does anyone care? Gets the place cleaned up.”

James shrugged. “Outsiders, noise, competition. Plus the guy is an obvious sleaze – small time operator looking for a quick buck. Dad’s sure he’s up to something, but can’t tell what. He’s turning the whole thing over for a community vote. Said he wasn’t going to have just the council decide.”

Billy grinned. “Maybe we should go next meeting. I’d hate to miss a total meltdown.”

Tima glared. “Government is not a wrestling match for your entertainment.”

“Be more people participating if it was.”

They all continued to munch and talk.

*This is everything I’d hoped for*, Rory thought, looking around at the hole, the fire, and his three friends. A smile started to spread across his face.

Just then, a grinding screech tore from the fire, and a wave of energy as powerful as a bomb slammed all four of the teenagers into the rocky wall. Almost as one, they turned and clawed at the dirt sides of the pit, instincts taking over with a primal desire to get to safety.

Rory turned his head back in horror and saw a thick, black cloud belch out of the fire and congeal like gelatin into the shape of a hideous creature. Ear-splitting shrieks tore from the flames. A heavy, burning stink of plastic, fear, and rot filled the space, making it difficult to breathe. The four desperately fought to find a way up, out, and away.

The smoke around the creature twisted into oily, arm-like clubs that whipped out and slammed them back to the ground. The thing loomed above, a churning tornado of fury, blocking out the stars. Terror and confusion washed over them. Rory felt the creature suck away his strength and his will.

Rory tried to turn his head, to look away from the vile sight, but he couldn’t. His muscles wouldn’t obey. His head throbbed. The inky, smoking thing wrapped tighter and tighter around his chest, around his throat. He tried to pull at it, but the smoky arms dissolved beneath his fingers, only to squeeze again as soon as his hands were through. He couldn’t breathe. His mouth wrenched open to scream, but no sound escaped. Yet all around him the shrieks of the beast deafened him.

*This can't be happening, he thought. Not possible. Home is just down the hill. Dad and Leon will hear the screaming. They'll come running. It can't be. It can't really be ...* Rory couldn't breathe. Blood roared in his ears. *This is it, he thought. Death by ... by what?*

He couldn't think any more. His lungs were begging for air. Black spots filled his vision. Beside him, grunts and moans from the others told him they too were getting crushed as the creature pulsed above them, roaring unintelligible threats and curses.

Red-hot pain shot through his chest. Tentacles sunk through his chest, grabbed his heart, and squeezed. Rory curled around the pain, gasping as the pain exploded. *Can't breathe. Pain. Darkness. Fading ...*

A tremendous roar shook the ground. The next instant, a blinding flash of light and a burning wave of heat propelled the creature backward, blasting through it and tearing it apart. A nerve-twisting scream split the air, slammed into Rory, overloaded his brain, and dropped him into sweet, black unconsciousness.

## Chapter 3

When Rory opened his eyes, everything was quiet. He looked around, listening. Nothing unusual. He felt for a lump on the back of his head, where he had hit the ground. Nothing. Confused, he struggled to his feet and heard sound to his right.

Billy sat up, rubbing his neck. “What was that?”

Tima moaned. “I thought we were toast for sure. That thing wanted to wipe us out.”

Everyone stared blankly, stunned for a moment. “Maybe there was some toxic spray on the wood,” said James. “I smelled burning plastic. Where’d you get it, Rory?”

Rory glared at him. “You’re kidding, right? That wasn’t something on the wood. I don’t know what it was, but it was alive and it tried to ...”

“Couldn’t be,” said James firmly. “It had to be some weird hallucination from the smoke.” “And we all had the same hallucination?” asked Billy. “What kind of hallucination squeezes the breath out of you? Get real, James. That thing was killing me. I don’t know how we’re still alive. No way we all just went night-night and had the same big, bad nightmare.”

“It wasn’t a dream.” A voice spoke from the shadows.

They spun toward the sound, bits of sand flurrying at their feet. Billy reached over and grabbed a thick branch and held it out like a club, his wiry arms pulsing with adrenaline. Tima moved into a judo stance, ready, watching, and steady. They stood their ground, prepared to fight or try once more for the wall.

“Calm down,” said the voice. “I’m not the beast. I saved you.”

An old man with large, dark eyes stepped out of the shadows and stopped in front of the fire, keeping his distance. He wore a loose leather shirt and leggings. His gray hair had hints of black and was pulled into two long braids. His wide mouth, corners turned up slightly, tried to hide a smile. A carved, square stone hung from a cord around his neck. He was the spitting image of Native Americans in school history books.

“Name’s Belecha,” he said. “Bell like ding dong and aha like a surprise, but put a little snot in it. Sorry about the attack. I didn’t think they would sense you so soon. I also figured you’d be safe in your kiva.”

All of Rory’s attention fixed on the man and his wise, wrinkled face. It was like the rest of the world went out of focus. He couldn’t see or even sense the others. Only he and Belecha, with his deep, almost infinite eyes, were there.

Rory shook his head to try to clear it. Didn’t work. Instead, the world seemed to spin.

In a gentle, but commanding voice, Belecha said to him, “You better sit down, Techta. You’re about to fall and if I try to catch you, you’ll get spooked. I let you fall, you’ll bang your head. Either way you lose.”

Knees losing their strength, Rory slid down until he was sitting on the hard ground. The rocky surface felt safe and secure. Very real, after too much weirdness. He looked up at the man who seemed friendly but carried himself with the confidence of a seasoned warrior.

“What was that thing? Why did it want to kill me? Who are you? What do you want?”

Belecha held up his hands, his long, thin fingers and pale palms standing out in the firelight. “One question at a time and not too much. Looks like you haven’t decided whether to pee, puke, or pass out.”

Rory took a breath. “Okay. What was that thing?”

“An energy sucker. We call ‘em Kroledutz. They feed on the energy of living things and particularly like to munch on people. They usually just take a sip now and then. That way, they can keep feeding on a person for years.”

“You call that sipping?” yelled Rory, pushing against the ground to stand.

Belecha made a calming gesture with his hand. “I said usually. You’re a special case. You, it wanted to kill.”

Rory felt panic rising. “Kill me? Why?”

Belecha shook his head. “Too much to explain now. Important thing is that I got it before it told the others where you are.”

“Others!” Rory leapt up and headed for the side of the pit. “There are more? How many? Where do they come from?” He had to get home. Nice, safe, normal home.

Belecha touched his shoulder. “You’ll never learn anything if you start shouting every time I tell you something.”

Rory jerked away. “What! That ... that ... thing just about ripped my heart out of my chest! And there are more? And you think I should be calm! No way. I’ve got every reason ...”

Belecha’s body burst into a towering, glowing orb. Waves of energy washed over Rory like a blast of sun at mid-day. “HUSH!” The word shook the ground.

Rory hushed.

Belecha continued in a commanding roar. “Pup! You got too much to learn too fast and if you don’t learn it and learn it good, you’re gonna be toast ... very messy toast. Most likely, you’ll be dead meat in one, maybe two days. Maybe, just maybe, if you shut your mouth and open your ears and try to kick start that brain, you’ll still be in one piece in a week.”

Rory's mouth gaped. Belecha, shrinking toward normal size and shape, reached out with his long fingers and gently closed it.

Belecha nodded. "Better." He gestured toward the fire. "That was just a rover. Mostly Kroledutz hang out in packs – we call 'em nests. Most people on this planet can't see 'em, but they've been here since before humans were fighting over bananas. They've grown strong the last few thousand years, and now they're planning to take over. You and your friends are the last chance to stop them."

Rory protested. "Us? We can't fight something like that. Why don't you all leave us alone? I promise I won't say anything. None of us will. Just leave us alone!"

Belecha shook his head, sadness in his eyes, and placed a hand on Rory's shoulder. "It's up to you and only you. I know you don't believe me, but you chose this path. Now you have to try, because if you do not, it will be over before it begins. The Kroledutz won't rest until they have ripped you apart. They don't care if you fight. They'd be happier if you didn't – easier for them. They only want you dead. After you, they will feast on your friends. Finally, they will finish their destruction of everyone and everything on this planet. Ready for the worst news? You probably can't stop them. You are probably already dead, just waiting to fall. The only chance, and it's a small one, is if all four of you work together, learn very fast, don't die, and we all are very lucky."

Rory suddenly remembered James, Billy, and Tima. He broke his gaze from the old man and looked around. A glowing fog filled the hole. Through it, he could barely see the others frozen in place. Fear rising again, he looked back at Belecha, clenching his fists. "What did you do to them? Let them go!"

"I didn't do anything to them, Techta. You and I have stepped out of your world for this conversation. They are the same. Think of this as being between moments of time."

"That doesn't even make sense. How can you ..."

Belecha shook his head. "I'm not going to explain it now, Techta. It's been a long night for you, so let me stick to the essentials. There's a thing that needs doing, and you and only you can take the first step. Take that step and you might just survive. Might. You decide and the others will come, too. Either way, it's in your hands."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell the others. Make the choice. Then, you must state *your intention*. The rest will follow."

Rory looked at this mysterious old man with the impossible story and shook his head. "This is not turning out to be the evening I expected."

A grim smile tugged at Belecha's mouth, reaching the crinkles of his eyes. "Don't you like surprises?"

Rory shot him a look. "How come you know all this?"

Belecha winked. “Well, the first reason is that I am wise beyond my years – and that’s saying a lot. The second reason is that I’m a Watcher.”

“What’s that?”

Belecha rolled his eyes. “Hmm ... a Watcher ... what would a Watcher do? Let’s think.” In an instant, his body disappeared, leaving only his eyes floating before Rory. They grew, turning into huge, glowing orbs. Belecha’s voice boomed from the darkness. “I watch, bright boy.” The ground shook with his words, and Rory felt dizzy.

“I’ve been watching and planning for more than 5,000 years, and if you can’t activate the Stone by the next full moon, we don’t get another chance. Tag – you’re it!”

With that, the eyes exploded, sending whizzing, whistling streams of color spinning out in all directions.

Rory stared at the colors shooting by and, for the second time that evening, fainted.