

# Veil of Deception

Chronicles of the Chosen



by Shanon Mayer



*Morgan Lafayette returns, but this time she is missing her faithful sidekick Tilson. The fey at Zea Island have fallen victim to a mysterious illness, and now Morgan has to travel even further than she had ever expected to find a cure and save her friends. From the bottom of the ocean to a magical land above the treetops, Morgan faces more danger - and more adventure - than ever before.*

# Veil of Deception

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# **Veil of Deception**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Lost and Found**

**T**he woods were thick with bushes, shrubs, and plants covered in sharp, knifelike thorns. Among the bramble and bracken, a lone man trudged into the forest. Time after time, the man found himself stuck fast to a bush, but he pulled away and continued on. He knew that his goal was ahead somewhere and that his prize lay not far beyond. He could hear the river up ahead, but the dense foliage muted the sounds of the rushing water, and he could not tell how close or how far he was from the waterway. He swore as a branch snapped across his face, leaving a deep, stinging welt as a reminder to slow down and be more careful, but he couldn't slow, not when he had come this far. Although his leg was still hurting from the last fall he had taken, he had to continue on.

He stumbled as the ground dropped from beneath his feet. Falling forward, he grasped at the low-hanging branches, praying that they would aid rather than hinder him this time. The damp, rotting twigs snapped and slipped out of his hands, and he fell, rolling down the side of the steep cliff into the cold water. Strange, dark birds took flight as he fell, startled by the sounds of breaking branches and human swearing. They soared high overhead, complaining loudly about the disruption.

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In the frigid water, the man was tossed and turned by the heady current. His fingers slipped from branch to branch, and the twigs that he managed to tangle his fingers in snapped off as he was pulled away. He kicked and swam, trying to get close enough to reach the bank where stones and large river rocks might slow his movement. His fingers grasped at every item they contacted, nails scraping across smooth stones and rough branches. Finally, he managed to catch hold of a slippery rock that barely crested above the water. Panting for breath, he clung to the stone and, half-drowned, tried to gather enough strength to climb out of the water. Sputtering and swearing, the man pulled himself up the muddy bank. Not for the first time, he wondered why he had set out so soon after the rain had stopped falling.

As he wiped the water and mud from his face, he noticed a strangely shaped bush just ahead of him. Reaching out a pale and shaking hand that had been scraped raw by his tumble downriver, he tugged on the branches to loosen them, finally moving them aside to reveal stonework, ancient and carved with archaic runes. He let out a sigh of relief at the sign that he was still on the right path. He pushed on deeper into the vegetation.

Trees seemed to reach down from the sky to grab at him and bushes and roots seemed to trip him at every step. The man bit back a howl of frustration as he tripped again, this time falling into a patch of hard, sharp thorns. He pulled himself out and spent a few minutes

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pulling the barbs from his clothing and skin. Ignoring the pain from the stinging thorns, he trudged further into the forbidding woods. At long last, he caught sight of his destination.

The trees opened to reveal a river roaring across the forest before him. Mist rose from the raging waters, swirling up and blocking almost all vision. In the haze, he could barely discern the outline of an ancient stone bridge, far off to his left. A satisfied grin spread across his face as he turned towards the crossing.

He pushed through the dense underbrush, following the path of the river, not seeming to notice as the sharp-edged brambles pierced through his red sweatshirt and deep into his skin. He nearly fell through a long-rotten log that was covered in slick fungus. Almost absently, he brushed the damp, stinking lichen from his clothing. Wet leaves and slippery moss made him slow his pace as his feet slid from beneath him once more and he crashed to the ground, tearing yet another hole in his already mangled jeans. Finally able to leave the infernal woods behind him, he turned out of the brush and stepped onto the bridge.

It was made of gray stone, musky-smelling and slick. The mist coalesced here, thickly enough that he could almost reach out and touch it. As he carefully made his way across the unsteady surface of the bridge, he kept a firm hold on the railing, noticing the cracks that ran from shore to shore and across the width of the bridge. As he walked, he hoped that the stones wouldn't give out before he made it

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to the other side. Even more, he hoped that there would be an easier way back out than having to cross the bridge again.

He approached an enormous archway and, thinking that he had made it to the other side, let out a sigh of relief. A low, grating sound began above him, and he looked up to see a portcullis filled with what appeared to have once been lethally sharpened spikes but were now rusted and pitted with age hovering directly overhead. His eyes widened and he dove forward, rolling along the slippery stones as the barricade slammed down behind him. The crumbling bridge shivered with the impact and the man could hear bits of the time-scarred stone falling into the river below. He could also see that the bridge ran further yet, he was only about halfway across the river.

With yet another oath, the man jumped to his feet and ran, heedless of the mire under his old, worn sneakers. His feet slipped and slid under him, his right leg throbbing in agony, and he barely caught himself from falling a couple of times, but he kept running. He could feel sections of the bridge give way and fall as more cracks raced alongside him. With a desperate heave, he threw himself onto the solid land at the opposite riverbank. Hearing a tremendous crash behind him, he looked back to see the bridge tumble into the swirling mist below. His race to safety had reopened an old injury in his leg, and now that he had a chance to stop and catch a breath, he knew that walking any further today would be torturous.

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“This had better be worth it,” the man muttered to himself as he stood and brushed the grime off his tattered jeans. He was on a rough stone walk, about four feet across and barely visible under all of the mosses and fungus thriving in the damp land. With a deep breath, he grimaced at the yeasty scent of the air and headed up the walk towards the enormous building barely visible through the fog.

The building appeared to be an ancient keep, with defensive walls and battlements to keep marauders out. The man approached the massive wooden gates, held one hand out with the palm facing the building, and whispered, “Po’ort,” in a husky voice. His hand started to glow a soft yellow, and beams of light shot from each of his fingers towards the barrier. The lights hit the gates and exploded outwards in a storm of yellow sparks. With a creak of ancient, swollen wood and the squeal of rusted hinges, the gates swung open.

Inside, the building was dark and forbidding. No light penetrated the solid stone walls, and the air was thick and heavy with the musty odor of time. The muted noise of small rodents echoed through the halls, and the heavy walls felt as though they were closing in around the man as he walked among them. He pushed up the sleeves of his sweatshirt and picked up a small, rounded stone from the floor, holding it in the palm of his hand. Lightly, he blew some of the dust off of the old rock.

“Verlich,” he muttered, and the stone began to glow a bright red-orange. Slowly gaining brightness, the stone lifted off of the

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man's hand and began to spin as it hovered in the air, lighting the room around him and forcing the shadows to recede back to the walls where they belonged. The stone rose until it was just over the man's head and stabilized, staying just a couple of inches above his hair. There, it followed the man as he moved around, staying where it would best light his way.

Now that he could see again, the man continued his exploration. He walked through room after room that was filled with iron and wood furniture. Many of the furnishings looked as though they had once been covered in fine fabrics, but only scraps of cloth, tarnished metal, and cracked pieces of wood remained. Rat-chewed carpets were strewn across the floors, collecting dust and droppings. Ancient tapestries drooped from the walls, their colors long since faded. Soot, grime and dust of the ages covered every surface.

The man searched through each new room until he found a tapestry that still clung to the remnants of its former glory. A circular design in deep maroon and royal blue shone through the veil of filth. The man stopped here and reached out a hand to the time-worn fabric. He ran the fingers of his hand gingerly over the surface, dislodging clumps of dust and moldering fabric as he went. He wrapped his fingers around the edge of the tapestry and, with a quick jerk, ripped it off the wall. The fabric fell with a thump to the floor, raising a cloud of dust into the air and revealing a doorway that had remained undiscovered for countless ages.

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He walked towards this entrance purposefully, with one arm outstretched and almost no hint of a limp, muttering, “Po’ort, ik zueu,” as he went.

The door opened as easily as the gates at the front of the keep had, with barely a protest from the rusting hinges. Beyond the doorway lay a staircase, leading up the side of a stone wall and climbing higher into the crumbling ruin. The roughly cut stones of the steps were coated in the same slick moss that grew outside as well, and the man winced in anticipation of the treacherous climb.

As the man ascended, he could hear a shrill keening off in the distance, starting softly but rapidly swelling to a piercing shriek. It was the mournful sound of sadness itself, and he could feel his insides twist in grief and rage. “Soon,” he promised the air. “I will find a way soon.”

As the wailing continued, he climbed the stairs, tears running down his cheeks, blurring his vision. He missed a step, then another, and barely caught himself as he began to slide back down the stairs. He wiped his tears on his sleeve and resumed climbing. As he reached the summit, the wailing stopped, and he stopped to wipe the last of the sadness from his face and breathe a sigh of relief.

The stairs led into a large room. Faded red and blue tiles, many of them chipped and broken or missing completely, covered the rough stone floor. As the man entered the room, he heard a low growl from the shadows and turned to face the noise.

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A giant lizard, over seven feet tall and at least twenty feet long, lunged out of the shadow at the man. Its head was shaped much like a bird's, with a long, sharp beak and deep-set yellow eyes intently focused on the intruder. Long horns curved backwards from the top of its head towards its beak, forming a strange, living helmet. A light green fringe of spikes ran from the top of the strange creature's head down its back to the tip of its tail.

The man tried to sidestep the attack, but his sneakers, still covered in mucous from his trek across the bridge, slipped out from under him and he fell sidelong onto the floor, hissing in pain as he twisted his already injured leg. He quickly rolled to the side and out from directly in front of the mammoth creature, glancing around the room for some way of surviving the vicious guardian. As the lizard turned towards him again, the man climbed to his feet, still looking around for any sort of a weapon to use against the enraged beast. The glowing rock, now without guidance from him, sank to the floor of the room and faded. Only the scant light from the filthy, moss-covered windows remained to illuminate the room.

On the other side of the room, he spotted a short, fat pedestal with a large book propped open on top of it. A golden strip of metal held the book open. Since they were his goal in coming here, the man knew better than to use either the book or its stand as a weapon. Scanning further, he discovered a tall candelabra shaped like the head of a monstrous beast with four horns growing straight up from

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the top of its head. Three glowing candles were attached to the horns, and a skull—apparently human—sat carefully atop the monster's head between the candles. He darted towards the candelabra, feeling the thick, stale air move behind him as the great beast missed once more.

He slid to a stop and turned towards the lizard, snatching up the candelabra in the process. It was much heavier than he had imagined, and he grunted with the effort of swinging it. To his surprise, the candles were not candles at all, but instead were small, oil-filled urns that fueled short, wide wicks. The skull did not fall from the holder as the man had expected; perhaps it was more securely attached than it had appeared. Nevertheless, he thrust the iron holder towards the lizard.

The creature stopped short of the iron candlestick, its claws scoring deep gouges into the floor as it backed away from the flames. One of the urns flew off the makeshift weapon with the momentum of the swing and landed on the rough hide of the lizard. The urn, cracked by its impact with the animal's horn, slipped and wedged itself against the side of its head.

As the oil leaked from the crack, it ran down over the creature's hide, causing tiny but quickly growing rivulets of fire to begin snaking across the lizard's face and head. The lizard bellowed as the fire continued to burn, and it backed away a number of paces,

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clawing at its head with both of its front paws. It shrieked, and the room slowly began to fill with the odor of burning flesh.

The man took another swipe at the creature with the candelabra, and the lizard backed up another step, still clawing at its face, trying to put out the fire. Satisfied that the creature would be occupied at least long enough for him to finish his task, the man turned toward the book on the pedestal.

Keeping a wary eye on the burning lizard and not releasing his only weapon, he stood next to the book and commanded, “Ik nu’uw ben, bediende. Eiganaar!”

A violet light flashed around the book and the pedestal it rested on, swirling around and coalescing into the book as though a tornado had been released and captured.

Hesitantly, the man reached out to take the book. A small flare of violet light shot out from under the cover as he picked it up from its resting place, but it faded quickly. The man set down the candelabra and, holding the book securely in both of his hands, turned back to the singed beast. He held up the book so that the beaked lizard could see the cover.

The creature had finally managed to put out the flames, leaving blackened flesh where the fire had scorched it. It made no move to attack the man again, but sat cautiously, watching him.

“If anyone enters this room after I leave, kill them.” When the beast lowered its head in obedience, the man turned back to the

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pedestal and opened the book. The large pages rustled under his fingers as he searched through the ancient writing. Finally, he found the inscription he sought. He closed the book and tucked it securely into his sweatshirt before turning northward. “Verzend naar mijn woonplaats!”

Bright violet light surrounded the man. Tendrils of colored lights swirled around him faster and faster, creating a blur of motion. With a snap of electrical energy, he disappeared. The horned lizard walked cautiously to where the man had stood, sniffed the air for a moment, and then settled down to wait for another intruder.

## Chapter 2

### Ethereal Fields

Morgan drummed her fingers on her desk. After everything she had been through over the last couple of months, she didn't find life as an early American pioneer exciting in the least. For the last two weeks, her teacher, Mr. Evans, had been talking about the difficulty of pioneer life and the bravery of the first pioneers, who scouted out all the way to Oregon for new land, but Morgan couldn't care less. Deciding that she should at least look like she was doing something, she picked up her pencil, opened her notebook, and began doodling.

As Morgan drew, a tiny creature that was no taller than her thumb flew over to her and landed on the book. It was a peri, a diminutive fey that looked like a tiny girl with butterfly wings. All of the peri Morgan knew had unusually colored wings, and this one had light purple wings, with iridescent pink and golden swirls that reminded Morgan of her mother's opal earrings. She peered over Morgan's pencil and watched as the shape started to take form. Shaking her head, the miniature fey pointed to a part of the picture. "He should have pointier ears," she whispered, "and his head should be more rounded, with puffier fur on top."

Morgan nodded and made a couple of adjustments, clarifying the sketch of her friend Tilson and pulling her box of colored pencils

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out of her backpack to add a shade of darker orange color to his hair. He looked almost human in her drawing, except he was covered in fur and his long tail waved out from behind him. “The fur at the end of his tail needs to be puffier, too, kind of like a furry ball.” The peri took flight and hovered overhead once more as Morgan waved her hand dismissively at her.

“Fine, you can be like that if you want to,” she chastised Morgan. “But Corran sent me here to bring you to meet with him.” The peri fluttered down until she was at eye level to the girl. “He said that Liore will take your place while you are gone, so she is waiting out in the hall.”

Although Morgan wasn't exactly thrilled with listening to Mr. Evans drone on about the early settlers, she knew that whatever Corran wanted her for couldn't be anything good. That was one of the things that annoyed Morgan the most about the fey; they only called when they were out of other options. The last time they needed Morgan, she had to save the dragons from near extinction. Although she had ultimately found a way to stop the dragon killings, she had lost one of her best friends in the process and she hadn't seen or heard from Tilson, another close friend, in over a month. She had never thought she would miss the annoying little haltija so much.

Even her normally distant and distracted mother had noticed that Morgan was more irritable than usual lately. She had tried to have a mother-daughter chat with Morgan about what was bothering

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her, but this wasn't something that Morgan could tell her about. Noticing the expression on the peri's face as she flew off, Morgan wondered if she was being moody again and didn't realize it. With a sigh, she raised her hand.

"Yes, Morgan?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Can't it wait for recess? There's only fifteen minutes left."

"I suppose so." She sunk back down in her seat and drew more fur on Tilson. She bit her eraser and considered his ears. She thought they that were still a little wrong, too, but she wasn't quite sure how to fix them yet.

The tiny girl landed on the desk next to her. "He'll come back, you know." When Morgan just shrugged, she continued. "He really liked you. I know it didn't seem like it, but he did." When Morgan still didn't respond, she sighed and took to the air again, barely disturbing the pages of Morgan's notebook. "I will go tell Liore that you will be there in a few minutes." She stopped halfway to the door and looked back at Morgan. "He was just scared. He'll get over it when he's ready."

Morgan watched from the corner of her eye as the peri flew out into the hallway and ducked into the girls' restroom across the hall. She saw a brief glimpse of herself, complete with brown tangled hair that sat just below the shoulders and even darker brown eyes, all set in an almond-shaped face that peeked through the door before the

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image ducked back out of sight. “Great,” she thought to herself. “Liore’s already in form.” Even if Morgan tried to back out of whatever the fey had planned for her, the spunky shapeshifter was likely to continue playing Morgan, causing unknown havoc in the process.

Liore was an elvor, one of the fey races that the humans referred to as elves when they thought of them at all. She was special even among her kind because of her unusual ability to take the shape of another, so she often stood in for Morgan when Morgan was called out to help the fey.

Becoming a chosen had taught Morgan that the fey were not imaginary beings, as the humans believed, but living, breathing creatures. The fey lived invisibly among the humans due to a magical barrier that had been erected between the human world and the fey world many years ago. Morgan could only see the fey because Morgan was a chosen, which basically meant that she was at the beck and call of the fey for the foreseeable future.

Morgan knew that it wasn’t Liore’s fault that she was being summoned in the middle of the school day, but she still felt a bit resentful that the council was so willing to pull her out of whatever she was doing, just because they wanted to. At least now, Liore would have to sit through the rest of Mr. Evans’s speech about the Oregon Trail.

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When the bell rang for recess, Morgan walked out of the classroom and looked around, searching for either Liore or the peri that had approached her. She spotted the diminutive fey just outside the girl's bathroom, beckoning to her.

After Liore checked her disguise against Morgan's true form, the elvor pointed to Morgan's travelling satchel, which was leaning against a wall. Sitting next to the pack was a long wooden pole with leather cords wrapped around it. "You will need those. Inside your pack is your cloak; I think that using it will be the easiest way for you to get out of this place without getting caught."

Morgan nodded and knelt by her pack, digging through it until she found the soft cloak woven in multiple shades of green. The last time she had used the cloak to escape from a volcano, and she had only recently gotten the foul smell of burnt matches out of the cloth. It had been given to her by a druid and allowed her to blend in with her surroundings, making her effectively invisible as long as she didn't move too quickly. She hoisted her satchel onto her back and slipped the cloak around her shoulders before picking up her staff and pulling the hood up over her head. A quick check in the mirror reassured her that she could not be seen, so she left the bathroom and carefully picked her way through the students in the hall.

Askel, another friend she had made since her work with the fey had started, waited a short distance from the school in an empty parking lot. He looked much like a giant, golden brown cat, except

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that he had brown wings and a white, feathery head that was beaked like that of an eagle. His front legs were clawed like a bird-of-prey as well, and his tail and rear paws were those of a great cat.

As Morgan approached, she threw back the hood of her cloak. Askel ducked his head for her to pet the feathers on his neck, and she gladly obliged. “How have you been? Everyone treating you well?” When Askel simply snorted and nodded his head in response, Morgan looked up at him sheepishly. “I forgot, hang on a second.”

She removed her cloak and tucked it back into her satchel. At the same time, she pulled a large necklace out of her pocket. Although she had initially believed that it was carved from a white stone, the hours that Morgan had spent examining this and her other magical items had caused her to realize that it was actually made of bone. It had been fashioned into a large tree, with tiny animals carved onto the branches. She looped the leather cord over her neck and hoisted the satchel back onto her shoulder. “Better?”

“Yes, much. There was not much point in answering you before.” Without the magical talisman that allowed Morgan to understand Askel, all she would have heard were the grunts and growls of the gryphon’s natural language.

As Askel chuckled, Morgan climbed up onto his back. Once she was firmly secured, he took off with a running leap and launched into the air. The peri darted up alongside them and settled onto the

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back of Askel's head, ducking down, grabbing onto a handful of feathers, and tucking in her wings in order to not get blown off.

The small group flew over town, and Morgan settled back to enjoy the ride. The first time she had ridden on the gryphon, she had been afraid that the people below would be able to see them, but that had never happened. The fey had a particular magic about them called *glamour*, an extension of the magic that separated the human and fey worlds. The glamour made the fey undetectable to the humans, and apparently covered Morgan as well while she was airborne with one of the fey.

Her other fear about flying with Askel had been that he would drop her, but she had flown with him enough by now, and even slept while airborne a couple of times, to know that he would never let anything happen to her. Morgan watched the ground as it whisked by under her and then looked ahead, trying to see the river.

As they approached the waterway, she saw Zea Island, where she always met with the council. Although she knew that it was hidden by fey magic, she had spent enough time among the fey that she could see through all but the strongest glamour. She leaned forward and held on to the feathers on Askel's neck as they dropped towards land. In the center of the tree-covered island was a small clearing, maybe two to three acres across. Askel circled around and landed in the open space, trotting a few steps as he contacted the

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ground. Beside them, the peri darted across the clearing, quickly disappearing into the trees.

Other fey were in the clearing as well, many that Morgan knew and a couple that she did not. Morgan looked around, expecting to see Corran, the tall, golden skinned elvor who spoke for the council, but he was not in sight. She dropped to the ground and looked around. She raised a hand to greet the handful of fey that she recognized, barely hearing the muttered whispers around her.

“Do you think she has heard yet?”

“It could be why she was sent for, do you think?”

“I have no idea,” another fey responded, “but I am certain that we will find out soon enough.”

Morgan pulled down her satchel and staff, preparing to head over to the group of gossiping fey, when a familiar elvor with golden skin and long, silver hair approached, spreading his hands wide and bowing. “Welcome back, Morgan. I trust that your time away from us was uneventful.” The group of whispering fey quieted as he spoke.

Morgan looked away from the fey in the shadows and bowed in return. “It was relaxing, yes.” She stood back up and smiled at her friend. “How have you been, Corran?”

Corran straightened as well and gestured that she should follow him. He led her off to a side of the clearing, away from the gossiping fey, where a tall creature who appeared to be a man from the waist

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up and a goat below the waist waited patiently. Morgan wrapped her arms around the apotharni and hugged him tightly.

He hugged her in return, and then looked down at the girl. “How are your shoulder and your leg feeling lately?”

About a month ago, Askel had caught Morgan as she jumped off of a cliff to escape a volcano and the enormous man who lived inside it. She had received a nasty bruising on the back of her legs, and Askel had ripped into her shoulder when he caught her. Arien, the apotharni, had tended to her injuries and taught Morgan a lot about the fey and others who had been chosen like herself in the process. She rotated her arm at the shoulder to show him that she still had full movement and squatted down. “Good as new.”

Arien smiled at her again. “That is terrific. I had hoped that you would enjoy a complete recovery.”

Morgan nodded. “There was a bit of scarring at first, but I used the ointment that you gave me, and there’s barely any mark left.”

Arien insisted that she roll up her sleeve to show him how she was healing.

Morgan looked back over at Corran, who was watching them bemusedly. “Is this just a checkup, or is this about what everyone was talking about when I got here?”

“It is neither.” Corran stepped further into the trees and sat on a low-hanging branch. “Your assistance is needed once more at Magicgleam’s lair.”

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The last time she had seen Magicgleam, the enormous dragon had been deep inside her lair, assisting in the release of a large amount of trapped fey magic. “Is she all right?” Her heart sank as she asked. A short time ago, a former chosen had attempted to eradicate the dragons entirely, and Magicgleam was one of the few dragons to survive.

Corran nodded. “She is. Her magic was strong enough to allow her to escape the ethereal blast relatively unharmed. Unfortunately, there were a number of non-fey living nearby who were not as lucky.” He stood up and walked towards Morgan. “The ether in that area is still very unstable at this time, so none of us fey can risk entering to capture these wild animals. We need you to retrieve them and move them to a safer area.”

Morgan nodded. Ether was the magical substance that all fey were made of, so Morgan understood why none of them wanted to enter the area. Before she had a chance to ask anything further, they were interrupted by the same tiny flying girl that had summoned Morgan. “Excuse me, but we need Arien out here.”

The apotharni nodded, his expression sobering as he regarded the peri. “Has he gotten worse?”

“It appears so.” The girl flew off, with Arien following closely behind.

Morgan looked over at Corran once again. “What happened?”

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“One of the dvergar has fallen ill. We are not certain what this illness is, but Arien is trying to heal him.” Dvergar were fey that most humans, when they thought of them at all, referred to them as dwarves.

Morgan nodded. “Will he be okay?”

“We hope so, and Arien is optimistic. However, we need you to head out as soon as possible, before too much damage is done in the unstable zone.”

Morgan nodded again. “Should I leave my stuff here, then?” Since the ether, the essence of all the magic, was going haywire in the unstable zone, she didn’t want any of her precious magical things to get damaged or, worse yet, lose their enchantments entirely.

“We believe that would be best. I will personally ensure that everything is taken well care of.”

Morgan leaned her staff against the tree and pulled off the amulet. Reluctantly, she handed these over to the elvor. “How will I get there?”

“Askel has agreed to take you as far as he safely can. You will have to venture the last on your own.” Corran took the necklace and tucked it into his shirt. “Have no fear; you will not be there long enough to incur any damage from the unstable ether.”

Morgan nodded again and headed back over to Askel, who had not moved from his landing place. As she walked, she looked around and noticed Arien, who was kneeling next to a stocky fey whose face

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was flushed with fever. His beard was matted with sweat. The apotharni had a damp cloth, which he was using to wipe the sweat from the dvergar's face. Morgan started to detour that direction to see if there was anything she could do to help them, but Askel anticipated her and walked around to place himself directly in her path.

"I know." Morgan hefted herself onto the gryphon. "We have to go save the little forest critters."

They flew for a number of hours before finally coming down to land in a grassy field. Morgan slid from Askel's back and dropped nimbly to the ground. In the distance, she could see the gigantic rocks that marked the entrance to the dragon's lair, and she knew that Askel could go no further. Directly ahead of her, only about forty feet away, a shimmering wall swirled, filled with incandescent colors like a soap bubble. She turned to Askel. "I will be back soon. You stay safe, okay?"

The gryphon ducked his head and pawed the ground before sitting, looking much like the classical statues she'd seen in books and cartoons. Morgan ran a hand over his feathers and down along his fur before taking a deep breath, straightening her back, and walking forward into the bubble.

Being on the other side of the barrier didn't feel any different to Morgan, but she looked around somewhat hesitantly, checking to be sure that she could still see Askel beyond the wall. He noticed her

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concerned glance and nodded his head, so she smiled at him and turned again to the task at hand. The magical barrier circled everything above Magicgleam's lair, including a small field, a grove of trees, and the enormous rocks that Morgan had spotted from the air. She wandered around near the edge of the strange bubble, just looking at the land trapped inside.

"How am I supposed to find these critters?" she mused to herself. She walked deeper into the area, peeking over fallen logs and even under a few rocks. As she walked, a slight movement in one of the trees caught her eye, so she headed that direction, eager to finish her task.

The closer she got, the more she was able to discern tree from animal, and she was pleased to see that the movement she had noticed was only caused by a squirrel. Short gray fur and a long fluffy tail were all that she could see of the creature; it was attempting to hide behind the trunk of the tree. Slowly, quietly, she crept up to the animal, almost close enough to grab it, when it turned to face her.

A long snout, with a whiskered black nose and large, sad eyes faced her. Instead of the small ears of a squirrel, this animal had larger, canine ears that were cocked forward. Except for the size and the fact that the head was attached to the body of a squirrel, Morgan could have sworn that the animal in the tree was a wolf.

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Morgan stopped in shock as it bared its teeth at her and attempted to growl, but emitted only a pitiful squeak. The strange animal backed away from her, losing its footing on the branch and crashing to the ground below. It sat there, quivering and looking miserable until Morgan gathered her senses enough to scoop the animal up.

As she approached, the creature sprang to its feet and tried to run, but Morgan snatched it before it was able to get far. Carrying it with both hands at arm's length, she walked to the closest edge of the barrier while the animal squirmed, kicked, and tried to bite and claw at her. As she stepped through the barrier, the strange creature seemed to melt in her hands, separating into two slick brown puddles as it fell. On the ground, the goo coagulated into a squirrel and a wolf, each seeming rather sick and disoriented. Morgan stared, wide-eyed in shock as each of them struggled to their feet, regained their bearings, and shot off into the distance, each in opposite directions.

Even the steady Askel had to come closer and look, trotting around the shimmering barrier and turning his massive for a clear view. As the pair of released animals moved across the plain, he watched them with a puzzled look in his eyes.

Morgan walked over to her friend and smoothed the ruffled feathers on his neck. "I don't know either. I didn't think that the ether would do anything like that." She looked off in the distance, in

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the direction where the animals had run. “Do you think something like that could happen to me, too?”

Askel snorted in her ear, but she didn't take much reassurance from that. Moreover, she wondered if Corran had known about all of this and sent her in without warning anyway. She remembered a comment that he had made about how she wouldn't be here long enough to be affected, or something like that. She hadn't paid too much attention to it at the time, but now she was really wishing she had asked more about it. Heat crawled up the back of her neck and flushed her face at the thought. It was tempting to climb onto Askel's back and leave right then, but if there were more animals that had been affected like the wolf and squirrel, she couldn't just leave them there to suffer. She ran her hand down Askel's feathers one last time and went back into the bubble.

The next creature she found looked even stranger than the wolf-squirrel that she had already released. Coming about to Morgan's waist stood an enormous black cat with shining fur and the wings of a raven or crow, she didn't know which. When the creature saw her, it tried to run away as the wolf-squirrel had, but only managed to limp a couple of paces. There, it fell over onto its side and lay, staring at Morgan, with one wing trapped beneath its massive body. When it fell, Morgan noticed that each of its paws ended in long, wickedly sharp claws. It had a deep gash, about four inches long and maybe a half inch wide across one of its front legs. Morgan guessed

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that the wound was probably not new, because it was crusted over with blood.

“I’m not here to hurt you.” She tried to reassure the animal. “I’m here to help.” She wasn’t sure if the bizarre creature could understand her or not, but she hoped it would at least not attack her as she approached. Although the squirrel-wolf creature hadn’t actually hurt her when it fought back, this was a much larger animal, and Morgan wondered at how much damage the sharp claws would do to her if the winged cat attacked. Morgan carefully stepped closer to the creature, trying to look as nonthreatening as she could. The creature looked directly at her as she approached, its bright yellow eyes filled with anxiousness. Slowly, Morgan reached out a hand to the cat-bird the way her father had taught her to introduce herself to a new animal.

The beast sniffed her palm and looked back at her face. Morgan wondered if the poor creature was intelligent, even in part, but had no way of telling for sure. She just had to hope. She leaned down to pick up the massive animal, but discovered that it was far too heavy for her to carry, so she set it back down.

“Sorry,” she said, hoping that the bird-cat would understand. “I can’t lift you, so I will have to pull you out of here.” She squatted down, and the muscles in the back of her recently healed shoulder protested as she hoisted the upper half of the animal off the ground, trying not to bend its wings or hurt its injured leg any further.

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She slowly walked backwards toward the closest wall of the barrier, pulling the winged cat with her as she went. Before they had gotten very far, however, she had to stop and rest. She wasn't used to this kind of exertion. She laid the animal back onto the ground and leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees as she wheezed. "Looks like this might take," she panted, "a little longer than I thought." The cat looked back up at her and blinked, and Morgan swore that the animal could understand her. She sat down next to the great cat and stretched out her shoulder.

"Corran said that only non-fey were still in here. Are you fey, or are you just affected by the ether?" She looked down at the creature, which was still looking up at her as though listening intently. "I have an amulet that would let me communicate with you, but I had to leave it behind when I came here." She reached over and stroked the cat's glossy fur. "I wish I had it now, though."

After a couple more moments of rest, she picked up the cumbersome animal again and resumed her trudge toward the barrier. With a final grunt, she dragged the animal to the other side. Almost instantly, the creature slipped from her grasp, melting to the ground like warm pudding. From the puddle, a black bird fell, limping away from the barrier, the girl, and the remaining goop as quickly as it could. After a few hobbling steps, it took to wing and disappeared from sight.

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The cat took longer to reform than the bird had, slowly solidifying into a large, panther-like beast. It stood and looked at Morgan, arching its back and stretching. Its tail swished behind it as it evaluated the girl. It carefully took one step closer to the girl, then another, until it could stretch its head out and sniff her. As it walked, Morgan noticed that its injured leg had somehow healed. Morgan stood completely still as it snuffled her nose, her ears, her hair, and even her eyes before darting out a small, pink tongue to lick her gently on the cheek. With one last sniff, it blinked at her before turning to leap away.

Morgan stumbled over to a fallen log and sat, resting and watching the cat as it disappeared from view. She looked off to the side where she could still see Askel, who was waiting patiently where she had left him. With a sigh, she stood, stretched, and turned back into the ethereal field.

She wandered through the grassy area, stepping across the stone dais that led to Magicgleam's lair and wondering if the magical portal that allowed passage in and out was still functioning. She headed up the stone walk to see for herself, but images flooded into her head of magic gone horribly wrong, and she stepped off the stones.

As her shoes touched the grass again, a strange creature flew past just above her head. At first she thought it was a dragonfly, but then she reminded herself to take a closer look, since nothing was the

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way it should be today, at least not here. She followed the bug, running to keep up with it, and discovered that it was indeed just a little bit strange. It had a long tail, not like any dragonfly she had ever seen before. Although the dragonfly's body was a dark metallic green, its tail was a light red, almost orange. The tail curved up over the insect's body, ending in a sharp stinger. The tail moved from side to side as the bug flew, causing it to swerve all over the field.

Not wanting to catch this animal—partly because it was a bug, but mostly because its tail looked very much like a scorpion's and she didn't want to get stung—she chased the insect, trying to chase it out through the barrier. From one end of the field to the other, she chased it, swerving left and right in a strange zigzag pattern. A few times, it rose high enough in the air that she could barely see it, but soon enough, it would overbalance and plunge back towards earth again.

Morgan's shoulder still burned from lugging the giant cat out of the field, and now her legs were beginning to get sore as well. She swung her hands at the creature, trying to direct it out of the field, but the thing swerved around so much that she was barely able to keep up with it, let alone direct it to where she wanted it to go. Defeated, she sat down on the stone steps that led up to the dais and watched the insect fly away. She hoped that it made it back out of the zone, but she knew that she couldn't catch it. It would have to figure out how to leave on its own.

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She sat in the middle of the steps, tired, sore, and not very happy with Corran. “Did you know about this?” She wondered aloud. “Did you know that creatures were merging in here?” She stood and stretched her aching muscles before setting back out into the field towards the trees. “Will I get turned into one of these weird monsters, too?”

She looked around her as she walked, spotting the dragonfly with the scorpion’s tail off in the distance, but choosing to ignore it. She kept walking, hoping that there wasn’t anything worse in the trees than what she had already seen, but not optimistic in the slightest.

She stopped abruptly and took a couple steps backwards, knowing that she couldn’t have seen what she just thought she saw. Sure enough, there was a spider, weaving a shimmering web between the branches of a shrub. “You can’t be serious.”

She peered closer, hoping that it was just a normal creepy-crawly, but had to sigh in resignation when she realized that the spider’s web was so shiny because it, along with the spider, was made of pure, clear water. She wrinkled her upper lip in distaste and looked around, trying to figure out how to get it out of the magical field without having to actually touch it.

“Fine, I’ll get the stupid spider.” She looked around for a leaf or something to scoop it up with, but most of the leaves had blown away in the magical blast. With a sigh, she picked up a twig. “You

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can stay on the end of the stick, and I will carry you out.” She regarded the spider. “Not because I want to, but because I have to.” She leaned down to scoop the spider onto the end of the stick and grimaced as it climbed on. “You can stay right there, that’s close enough.”

She turned and walked towards the barrier, twig in hand, without taking her eyes off the arachnid. When it climbed a few inches further up the stick, she squeaked and dropped it onto the ground. “You want out of here? You’d better stay put.” She picked up a different twig to nudge the water spider back towards the end of the stick before picking it back up. “That’s your end, and this is mine. You can just stay right there.”

She looked out the corner of her eye to see how far it was until they reached the barrier and groaned when she saw that they had barely made any progress. The spider reached out a long, slender leg as if ready to move further up the stick again, and Morgan nudged it back with her second stick. “Nope, you can stay right there.”

She walked faster out of the desolate area, trying to be rid of the horrid creature as soon as possible. When she determined that she was close enough, she threw the spider, stick and all, out of the magical bubble. As soon as the wood and its rider passed out into the safer area beyond, the spider fell off the stick and oozed down to the ground.

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As Morgan headed back into the magical field, the dragonfly-scorpion flew towards her, barely making it through the incandescent barrier before falling to the ground. Morgan didn't wait for the creatures to separate and reform; she just stepped over the squishy spot and continued on her search.

By that evening, she had only found a couple more creatures that hadn't been able to escape the ethereal field. As the sun sank over the horizon and she was no longer able to see anything until she was directly on top of it, she decided to call it good and headed towards Askel.

The gryphon was sleeping, with both paws, both claws, and his tail firmly on the ground, his wings tucked in tight behind him, and his head bowed. Morgan approached him softly, not wanting to startle her friend. She carefully placed a hand on his neck and stroked his soft feathers.

Askel cracked an eye and regarded her, and Morgan couldn't help but notice that his eye seemed cloudy, as though he wasn't feeling well. "Are you all right?"

The gryphon stood up and stretched, spreading out his massive wings and pointing his beak towards the darkening sky. After holding the pose for a long moment, he folded his wings back in, lowered his head, and nudged the girl.

"Okay, I get it, you were just tired. Ready to go home, so we can both get some rest?" He nodded his head and scratched at the ground

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with one of his front claws, so Morgan climbed onto his back. As the moon rose over the trees, the pair took flight.



*Morgan Lafayette returns, but this time she is missing her faithful sidekick Tilson. The fey at Zea Island have fallen victim to a mysterious illness, and now Morgan has to travel even further than she had ever expected to find a cure and save her friends. From the bottom of the ocean to a magical land above the treetops, Morgan faces more danger - and more adventure - than ever before.*

# Veil of Deception

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