

## **The Key to Floating**

### **Murray**

Murray Patterson hadn't expected to find a silver locket caught in the wooden slats of Center Bridge early one Saturday morning. Nor did he expect that same locket to end up being the key to everything, just a few days later. But, as it happened, all of these things were true—even if Murray didn't know it, yet.

Murray Patterson was ten years old, and the second-youngest of six, with no known living parents or relatives. Clara, the oldest child at eighteen, had assumed the role of “parent,” with the next oldest, Bill, at sixteen, enforcing her rules. Then there was Abigail: Bright, energetic, and imaginative at fifteen. There was mischievous Ellen— nobody could be truly sure where they were, during the day, or what they did. There was Murray, the curious one. Lastly, the youngest child, Charlie, was eight. Charlie was quiet, but not shy—he simply knew the right moments to speak, and when to keep quiet.

It was dinnertime, two days after Murray had found the necklace he now wore, when the Patterson's door was practically knocked to the ground. Clara went to investigate, and soon found out the source of the sledgehammer-like noise: a large Messenger from the town, pounding a rhythmic beat on the wood. “Can I help you?” Clara asked, looking wearily at the man.

“I'm Messenger Edward,” he said, ignoring her question. “And I was sent to speak with Murray Patterson.”

At the round table in the Patterson kitchen, Clara, Bill, Abigale, Ellen, Murray, Charlie and their guest, Messenger Edward, all sat in silence. Finally, Messenger Edward turned to Murray. “I was in my tower, a couple of days ago, and spotted you on Center Bridge,” he said. In

the Floating City, as the land was called, there were five Bridges: West, East, North, South, and Center. Each bridge spanned a gap in the land, and below it, the “Danger Lands” lay, which was what the townsfolk called the lands any living creature would perish on within hours. That’s why the Floating City was called the “Floating City”—it was designed to hover above the dangerous lands below.

“Yes, I was on Center Bridge,” Murray confirmed, confused. It was an unspoken fact that Messengers knew everything that happened in the Floating City, thanks to their tall lookout towers.

The Messenger said, “I happened to be watching the Center Bridge when I saw you, young man, pick something up. May I ask what it was?” Then he added, to sound professional, “It has to do with stolen property, which is why I’m asking.”

Murray pulled at the chain of the locket around his neck. “What, this thing?”

Messenger Edward nodded. “Which part of the Bridge did you find it on?” he asked.

“Um,” said Murray. “Fourth.” Center Bridge, while considered a single bridge, consisted of four separate sections.

The Messenger paused, seeming to contemplate this. Then he stood up. “I’m afraid you’ll have to hand that over,” he said.

Murray just shrugged, reached up, and began unfastening the clasp.

“WAIT!” the messenger cried. “Don’t take it off. Not yet.”

Murray frowned. “Why not?”

Messenger Edward loomed over him, seeming to wrestle with what he should tell the boy. “Because, if you take it off before you get it to the vault, well. . .” he trailed off, but Murray got the feeling whatever the man was going to say wouldn’t be pleasant.

**Edward**

The Messenger looked at the boy, wondering what to do next. The child, Murray, looked to be no older than ten. *How had he gotten tangled up in all this?* But, this was the situation, and since it was Edward who had tracked the boy down, it would be Edward who handled it. *Alright*, he thought. Then outloud, he said, “Well, dear boy, looks like this is fate. Let me explain.”

Edward asked for the others to leave the room, so he could discuss the matter without too many prying questions from the rest of the household. Clara and Murray stayed, waiting for the Messenger to speak.

“That necklace is very valuable. And since you’re the bearer, you must be the one to make the journey to return it,” said Edward.

Clara glanced at her brother. “He’s only ten,” she argued.

“I know,” said Edward. “That’s why I was speaking with the king the other day, and we decided on an alternative, if, of course, Murray agrees to it.” The two stayed silent, so Edward continued. “Our alternative is that Murray becomes a Messenger, as my apprentice, and makes the journey once he is older. The safety of a Messenger tower would—*should*—keep the necklace and Murray safe for the time it takes for him to grow up.”

Clara glanced again at her brother. “Do you want to tell us *where* the vault is? Or why the necklace is so valuable?”

Messenger Edward ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I wish I could. But that information is classified, except for what I already told you.”

Clara was beginning to sound desperate. “At least tell Murray, then. He’s the one this directly affects.”

Edward started to speak, then stopped again. They were just kids, he reasoned. They couldn't cause too much trouble, if he told them. Actually, he remembered, kids could cause plenty of trouble. He would know. He had been a troublemaker himself, in his younger years. That's how he had gotten the position of Messenger so quickly. But that was beside the point.

Finally, he said, "Okay. I can do that."

"Will you be okay?" Clara asked Murray. The boy just nodded. Clara patted him on the shoulder and left the room.

Edward turned to Murray, trying to figure out what to do. "The city's going to collapse." There was no good way to say it. "That necklace, it's stolen, but it appears that the thief has discarded it. Or maybe has a twisted sense of humor," Edward grimaced. "That necklace is also known as the *Key to Floating*. That's because, well, open the locket, will you?"

Murray hesitated, then pressed the raised circle on the side of the locket. It opened, and Murray was a little surprised to see that inside there was no picture. Instead, a swirling liquid filled the frame. "What is it?" he asked, wide-eyed as he worked to keep his hand still to prevent spilling it.

Edward chuckled. "I'm afraid that's what's keeping this land afloat."

Murray narrowed his eyes. He'd heard the legends of how the Floating City became: the last queen of the land below, Queen Am, had predicted the conditions to turn inhabitable. So, she found a young apprentice, only seven years old, the story said, and asked to have a land fashioned above them, to save the inhabitants of the crumbling city. So the apprentice did. But, those weren't true, were they? Just stories the townsfolk told to explain the holes in the land that they had to build bridges between.

Edward sensed Murray's question before he asked it. "And no, it's not just a legend. That apprentice was real."

"So, what happens if I don't return it?" asked the boy.

Edward grimaced. "I'm afraid the city would collapse, in time."

Murray turned this over in his head. "Alright," he said. "I suppose I could become your apprentice."

## **Clara**

Clara had been told an infuriatingly small amount of information about what was happening with Murray. She could tell by the way he kept winding the chain of his necklace around his fingers that her brother was nervous. Clara wished she could help, but all she had been told was that Murray had to journey to the vault, when he was older—whatever the "vault" was—and return the necklace. In the meantime, he would become a Messenger's apprentice, and therefore a Messenger himself. Clara couldn't stand it. So, she had made a decision: she was going to sneak out. Get some answers. Find out why Murray was suddenly destined to do . . . whatever he was doing. So, the night before Murray was to leave for the Messenger's tower, Clara exited the house by means of the window. It was a clumsy exit—even though she had been doing it since she was four—and the eldest of the Patterson siblings found herself flat on her face in the dirt. Wiping grime from her dress, Clara stood and surveyed her surroundings. The first thing she realized was: it was dark. Darker than she had remembered it being when she had last made the climb to the ground, when she was fourteen. Regardless, Clara knew the path into town by heart.

The Pattersons lived in a little patch of trees called the Tangled Forest with a few other people who lived in little houses scattered among the trees. Still waiting for her eyes to adjust, Clara maneuvered the forest carefully. Exiting the trees, Clara arrived on the dimly lit streets of the town. She had been younger, when she had last visited at night, but still remembered the path, clear as day, even if a few of her hiding spots had become too small for her. Clara knew where she had to go: the castle. It had been a long, long, time since Clara had last spied—not *spied*, spied was too strong a word—*observed* the castle staff. Today, it was not the staff Clara was interested in: it was the Messengers. Messengers could be found in their towers, almost all the time, but the castle was still first. Clara had a growing suspicion the king was involved. After all, if it was so secretive, he must have *some* say in it. Clara made her way past the East Bridge and up to the castle, passing a saltwater reservoir with fish darting about it on her way. Climbing the gutter to the topmost window, Clara settled on a windowsill, just out of sight, careful to avoid the ants climbing around on the sill next to her. The king was sitting on his throne, in the conference room. Clara had first started watching conferences when her parents left, wondering if the king had something to do with their sudden disappearance, but she had stopped watching when she realized he truly didn't know, and it had felt wrong to keep sneaking around after that. But, the window was already open, and Clara meant no harm. Besides, she had to keep Murray safe. That was most important, not *morals*. But she still felt a pang of guilt, spying on—*observing*—the king. She started to tune out, since the king was mostly talking about someone named *Astrid*, but her ears pricked up at the mention of *Murray*.

“He’s the boy, right? The one with the key?” the king asked in a hushed voice.

Clara couldn't see who he was talking to, but she recognized the voice immediately. "Yes. That's him." Messenger Edward said. The king sighed, and when the Messenger spoke again, it was in a sharp tone. "Is something wrong, your majesty?" he asked.

"No," said the king, then added, "But I don't think we're on the right track, is all. And asking a child to journey to the vault by himself, even after he's grown older. . . that seems too dangerous."

Messenger Edward sounded as though he were trying very hard to keep his tone light. "What would be more dangerous, your majesty, would be letting the city *collapse*, knowing it was coming!"

Clara gasped, but smothered it with her hand. *The city's going to collapse*. It wasn't a question. It was an answer. An answer to what Murray was tangled up in. Well, partly. Clara was so surprised, she almost missed the next thing the king said: "No, Messenger. I certainly won't have that, either."

## **Murray**

Messenger Edward's tower was big, but also small, somehow. Maybe it was big, in reality, but the spyglasses and jars and papers lining the room made the walls appear to press in. Or perhaps it was actually really quite small, and the gentle clutter made the room seem to expand. Either way, Murray didn't have trouble thinking about it as home. A *temporary* home, he reminded himself, as Messenger Edward led him to a small room marked *Observation Lab*. Inside, a large, round room gave a 360 degree view of the Floating City. It was amazing. It was also disorienting. Murray turned, wanting to see what the North window showed, but stopped

short at the sight. He should've expected it, really, but the North window faced out onto a dry, cracked land far below them. The Danger Lands. To the left, the ruins of a castle could be seen, surrounded by dead trees and what looked concerningly like bones. Murray shivered.

Messenger Edward stepped up behind him, startling the boy. "Interested in exploring the Danger Lands?" he asked.

Murray looked confused. "But, everybody's forbidden from going to the Danger Lands," he said. "It's the law."

Messenger Edward laughed. "*Physicaly*, yes. But we can go there with our *eyes*. I'll show you." The man pulled a spyglass from a shelf, and handed it to Murray. He paused. "It's funny," he said. "We're forbidden from going there, and yet, in a way, the lack of inhabitants makes it one of the safest places."

## **Clara**

It was on the second day of the third week of Murray's absence that Clara noticed something off. It was early on Tuesday morning, and Clara was coming back from the town with Abigail. Bill had been left in charge for the morning. Then, the horizon was off. It was like the whole Floating City had dipped a few inches lower in the air, just enough for Clara to notice. One moment, the clouds were sitting nicely in the sky, the next, they jerked up just a little. Or, appeared to. Clara felt a little rush of adrenaline, like when rocketing down a hill at top speed, or when an elevator starts moving. Then it stopped, and Clara glanced at Abigail, worried.

"Did you see that?" she asked her sister. Abigail tilted her head; nodded; shrugged. She had seen it. *The city is collapsing*. Clara remembered from all those weeks ago, sitting on the windowsill at the castle. She shivered, and both girls continued on their way home.



## **Murray**

At first, Murray didn't notice anything wrong. But as the days passed, he saw Messenger Edward grow increasingly nervous. It was a Wednesday morning when Murray finally said something. Another moment of freefall, just like the first, came and went, and this time, Murray didn't waste any time. "We won't have enough time, will we?" he asked the older Messenger, looking up from his spyglass. "The city is already falling." Murray watched the Messenger, wanting to see if he could catch a glimpse of uncertainty to prove his point.

But the Messenger surprised the boy. "Well, I'm not going to lie to you. It appears that's exactly the case."

Murray shivered. "So, what do we do?"

The older Messenger contemplated this a moment, and then said, "At first, I wanted to keep you safe. But now I see none of us are even remotely safe. So yes, I think we must go."

Murray nodded. He had only been a Messenger for two months, and had wondered how much longer it would be before the older Messenger saw fit to take him. "When?" asked Murray.

Messenger Edward looked at him, concern etched in his features. "Today," he said.

The brief moments of freefall had increased significantly since the first time it had happened, two months ago. Now they were almost guaranteed to happen at least once a week. Messenger Edward was scurrying around the tower, collecting what appeared to Murray to be random objects. He spoke quietly to himself as he gathered. "Spyglass. That'll be useful. Murray! Bring your notes!" he called. The boy gathered his papers, looking out of the corner of his eye at the Danger Lands. They seemed to have gotten concerningly closer to the Floating City, and Murray had to look away.

“Where are we going, exactly?” he asked to distract himself.

Messenger Edward paused mid-gather, and looked at him. “You’re a trustworthy child, aren’t you? I suppose you have the right to know. But this information is top secret. If it got out, the Floating Cities would be in great danger.”

Murray saw his slip and pounced on it. “‘Cities’? Isn’t there just this one?”

Messenger Edward paused. “It’s. . . complicated. I’m sorry, dear boy, but we don’t have much time to talk.”

Murray looked back out of the window, and it hit him. “Are there others? Other Floating Cities?”

Messenger Edward sighed heavily. “Alright, fine. We don’t know for sure, yet, but recently another Messenger stumbled across some evidence that suggested as much.”

Murray paused. “But the Danger Lands were the only inhabited areas of land, when they became deadly. Everybody moved to this city. Right?”

“Yes. Well, we thought. It’s complicated, okay?”

Murray nodded, and kept his mouth shut.

Two hours later, both Messengers were on their way to the Tangled Forest, so Murray could tell his siblings of the sudden change in plans.

Clara was the first to speak, once the news was told. “You said he was too young,” she turned to Messenger Edward.

“I did,” said the Messenger. “And I still believe it. But this is urgent. I’m afraid that the city might. . .”

Clara cut in. “Collapse.” The Messenger looked at her, and she held his gaze. “You said so yourself.”

Messenger Edward ground his teeth together. *They had to get going.* “How do you know that?”

Clara ignored his question and said, “But Murray is still my brother. I don’t care if it’s urgent—I’m going with you.”

Murray nudged the older Messenger. “She’ll find a way, no matter what you tell her,” he whispered.

Messenger Edward nodded solemnly. “Okay, then. But we have to hurry.”

## **Clara**

The two Messengers and one young woman left the Tangled Forest, headed for Messenger Edward’s tower. It was on the other side of town. Crossing the West Bridge, then the Center one, Clara glanced at Murray—now *Messenger* Murray, she reminded herself—and saw a look on his face she had never seen before. It was a determined look, but also an unsure look. He was worried. So was Clara. But she was hardly going to let her fear show when she had been trusted to come. Messenger Edward ducked inside his tower to get his things, and Clara turned to her brother. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on? Or are you going to leave me to trail behind you two, always a step behind?”

Murray’s face twisted into a sour expression. “I thought you already knew everything.”

“No,” said Clara. “I know the city’s collapsing, and that that necklace has something to do with it. Other than that, I’m lost.”

Murray seemed to debate if he should tell her before leaning in to whisper, “Alright. I can tell you everything.” As Murray recounted the past few months to Clara, his sister began to

wonder, *Who would have stolen that necklace if they knew the city would collapse afterward?* Since every living being existed on the Floating City, nobody really had a reason to destroy it.

Messenger Edward exited the tower, and locked the heavy wooden door. “Now, I’m afraid, is where it gets dangerous,” he said, lowering his voice. “The vault that the necklace is kept in is below the city. The closest to the Danger Lands anyone has ever gotten. And it’s guarded.”

Clara narrowed her eyes at the Messenger. “Guarded from the people trying to return its treasure?”

Messenger Edward nodded. “Yes. From everyone.”

Clara tried to imagine what the guards would have to do to survive, suspended high above the most dangerous part of the world, in the extreme heat that bathed it. “How do we get there?”

Messenger Edward smiled. “As it so happens, being a Messenger gives you a few ways into the workings of the world. Follow me.”

## **Murray**

Messenger Edward led the two to the small patch of woods Southeast of his tower. On the edge of the woods, the man stopped, bent over, and started moving leaves and twigs around. The grass, shifting gently in the soft breeze, was also scrutinized. “I know it’s here. . . Astrid promised it was here.”

Murray took a moment to wonder who Astrid was, but didn’t have time. The older Messenger let out a loud *Ah-ha!* And pulled at a handle he had uncovered. The grass shifted slightly, and then lifted. Underneath, a long stairway ran down, down, down, into the ground.

“This way,” Messenger Edward said, flipping on a flashlight and descending the stairs. Murray followed, but Clara waited at the top. She didn’t know the man very well, and didn’t have the same trust as Murray did.

Murray saw her hesitate, and gestured for her to follow. “Messenger Edward knows what he’s doing,” he reassured her. Clara took one last glance at the city, and then followed the two Messengers into the dark.

### **Clara**

Clara didn’t *dislike* the dark. Or the cold. She had gotten used to both, sneaking in and out of her house at night. But she *did* dislike the crushing heat that surrounded them as they made their way below the ground. It should’ve grown colder, not hotter, as they descended into the city’s ground, but it made sense, Clara reasoned, since the Danger Lands were supposed to be scorching.

Finally, the three made their way out of the dark, and onto a small strip of land in a shaded, yet very daylit, area. Looking up, Clara could see the whole bottom of the Floating City. It was rather disorienting. Roots that had grown from trees dangled loosely in the space between the Danger Lands and the Floating City. Thin pathways snaked around the bottom side of the city, suspended by sturdy beams, and Clara gasped at the sight. It was like a little world of its own, under here. Below all of the townsfolk and shopowners and royalty. The Danger Lands spread out below, a scorching plain of cracked dirt, and Clara shivered, despite the heat.

Messenger Edward unfurled a map, and spread it on the ground between the three. “We’re right here.” He placed a finger on the map, and Clara leaned in, curious to see a map of the underside of her home. The rocks and dirt and walkways around them were all a dull

brownish red, and it made finding anything specific on the map rather difficult. But, as Messenger Edward explained the path they would take to get to the vault, Clara thought of a question.

“So, how do you know where the vault is?” she asked. “And don’t say it’s just part of being a Messenger—Murray’s a Messenger and he doesn’t know.”

Messenger Edward sighed. “Alright, maybe I’m not *just* a Messenger.” He seemed to want the conversation to move on, but Clara didn’t let it.

“I’m listening.”

“Fine. A few years back, the king appointed me to investigate a break-in at the vault. He suggested I become a Messenger, so I could keep my eye out for anything suspicious. Which ended up being young Messenger Murray, discovering a necklace that basically keeps this city floating twenty-four seven.”

“How did you know the king?”

“I’m his brother.”

This stunned Clara, as well as Murray.

“You never told me *that*,” gasped Murray.

“It. . . never came up,” said the older Messenger. “Besides, I’m technically older than him. I was supposed to be king, but didn’t want to. My brother suggested I run, so I did.” The Messenger chuckled. “That was when I was sixteen. So, he became king when he was fifteen.”

Clara gasped. “When he was *fifteen*?”

Messenger Edward nodded. “Yes, it was rather surprising. But the way it’s decided is just based on who’s next in line, which would’ve been me, but he was a genius and let me hide out in the castle until everybody forgot about me. Which didn’t happen, but they didn’t recognize me

after seven years, anyway.” The three had begun walking in the direction of the vault (or where Messenger Edward claimed the vault was), and Clara thought of another question.

“So, where are the guards?”

the Messenger just smiled. “They don’t guard *out here*. They guard up there.” He pointed up, and Clara was surprised to see towers, not unlike the ones of the Messengers above them, stretching up about twenty feet. They had lookout windows, but the rippling heatwaves made it hard to tell if anyone was watching them.

Messenger Edward had led them to one of the towers, and rapped his fist eight times on the door. A woman answered, and she surveyed the three travelers, her eyes stopping on Murray.

“Identification?” she asked.

Messenger Edward sighed. “I *could* show you my badge, Lorali, or I could just show you *this*.” He nudged Murray, who held up the locket.

“Good gracious, you found it.” the guard—Lorali—said, wide eyed. Then her gaze fell on Murray. She looked at the young Messenger, then the older one. “A. . . child,” she stated coldly.

“I know,” said Messenger Edward. “It was quite a shock. But he’s the bearer now, and also a Messenger. His name is Murray.”

Guard Lorali immediately stood taller. “My apologies, young Messenger. Right this way.”

Guard Lorali led the three through the tower. She paused at the threshold to the exit, and turned to Messenger Edward. “I trust you will guide them safely.” She said. Then, to everyone, “Good luck.”

## Murray

Murray's heart raced as he walked alongside his sister and Messenger Edward. He wondered what made this journey so dangerous. Probably the closeness to the Danger Lands. Murray was sure that if he jumped, it would only take him a few moments to reach the cracked ground below.

The heat was the most intense in the area directly below Center Bridge, where all of the walkways crossed, and where the three paused and Messenger Edward said in a hushed voice, "Alright, team, this is it. It only gets more dangerous from here." Murray wondered *how*, exactly, it would get more dangerous.

The Messenger continued, "Murray, you must remember that *you* alone hold the key to this entire world."

Murray didn't think that was something he could easily forget. "I know."

"Clara, I'm trusting you." Messenger Edward said, turning his attention to the young Messenger's sister. "I don't know you as well as Murray, but I'm willing to trust you. Don't make me regret it, okay?" Clara nodded solemnly, but didn't speak. Messenger Edward then faced forward, and the three made their way across the walkway and to another tower. The older Messenger then rapped his fist on the wooden door, and waited. It was a few minutes before the door clicked open, and a young person wearing a flowing black dress answered. They had black hair, and no face, just a blank space where one usually would be.

"Hello, Edward." they said.

"Hello, Astrid." said Messenger Edward.



**Edward**

Prince, almost-king, and now Messenger, Edward had known Astrid through each stage. Well, he hadn't *known* Astrid. Nobody did. It was hard too, considering the lies and doubts, mistruths and fake claims. But, if anybody *could* know them, it was Edward. He knew their name. And pronouns. And their job. Astrid was a guard, Edward knew, one of the two guards who was positioned outside of the very vault they were trying to reach. But Astrid was not always truthful. It was their job, after all.

To keep people from entering the vault, two guards had been selected to stand at the entrypoint: one guard who always lied, and one who always told the truth. Astrid always lied. But the thing was, they *didn't* always lie. It was even a lie that they always lied. It got very confusing, very quickly. But Edward was somewhat friends with Astrid, and if not that, they were at least friendly.

Now, Astrid was looking at Edward. "Where do you want to go?" They asked.

Edward bit his lip. "The vault." he said. "And quickly. We don't want the world to dip another few inches while we're down here."

He shivered, but Astrid just shrugged. "And so what if it does? I've been down here every time, and so have all the other guards."

Edward was not in the mood to argue, and they didn't have time. "So tell me, how can we get into the vault?"

Astrid just turned and started walking.

Desperate, the three others followed. "Are you taking us there? Astrid?" But the faceless figure just kept walking, their black dress and hair flowing out behind them. "I'm afraid this is rather urgent." Edward pleaded, fanning himself to keep the ever persistent heat at bay.

“Oh, isn’t everything always?” sighed Astrid.

“Astrid, please.” Edward said.

“We’re here.” Astrid had stopped abruptly, and Edward almost knocked into them, but managed to stop in time, grumbling in frustration. Then he looked up. *The vault*. This was it.

## Clara

Astrid didn’t say anything, but turned to one side of the vault, and positioned herself right next to the door. Another guard was standing on the opposite side. The other guard looked identical to Astrid in every way, right down to the dress.

Messenger Edward glanced behind him for a moment, and when he looked back at the guards, he sucked in a breath. “I suppose you’ve switched again, haven’t you?”

Clara didn’t understand what he meant, but was getting the growing feeling that Astrid was not going to answer any questions.

Then one of the guards, the one on the left, spoke: “*You’ve found our vault,*”

Then the other guard, the one on the right, continued: “*But here’s the fault,*”

“*One of us lies, the other tells truth,*”

“*But to find out which one, it appears you’re the sleuth,*”

“*Questions, you may ask one,*”

“*But any more, our answers are none,*”

“*And hand over the key, our answers spilled,*”

“*And whoever you choose, one action fulfilled,*”

There was a pause, and then one of the guards raised a hand, and pointed at the group. “*It’s over the edge, if you choose the lie, and into the most secure place in the world, if you choose the truth.*” Then both were silent, standing perfectly still.

Messenger Edward turned toward the others. “Alright. We have to think. How do we find out which guard is which?”

Murray glanced at the vault door. “But, we know which guard is which. We *saw* Astrid walk up to the vault.”

“Not exactly.” Said Messenger Edward.

“Because they can switch sides without us even noticing.” Clara interrupted. She had been watching the guards, who hadn’t moved a muscle since their speech. But Clara had remembered Messenger Edward’s earlier comment about them switching. *Maybe they can switch between each other, or the positions they’re standing at, whenever they want, and we would never know. Maybe they don’t know who the other is.* It seemed like a logical explanation.

“Exactly right, Clara,” said Messenger Edward.

Clara thought about it, and said, “If we give the necklace to Astrid, the guard who always lies, they’ll throw it into the Danger Lands, right?”

Messenger Edward nodded.

“And if we give it to the other guard,” Clara paused, unsure of the other guard’s name.

“She’s called Millie,” Messenger Edward said.

Clara nodded. “So if we give it to Millie, she’ll put it in the vault?”

“Correct.” Said Messenger Edward, “But nobody’s ever reported having success with guessing which guard is the truth-telling one.”

All three turned to look at the two guards. Clara glanced at Murray. *Please have a plan.* She thought.

## **Murray**

Murray shivered. But he didn't hesitate. He knew what to do. Unclasping the locket's chain, Murray stepped forward, watching both guards intently. Neither moved. Then, he thrust out the chain to one of the guards and said, "Here. Take it." He closed his eyes, but had to peek again as slowly, the guard raised a hand.

"Murray! What are you doing?" yelled Clara, backing up a few steps. Messenger Edward said something, too, but Murray wasn't focusing on them. He was focusing on the guard. The guard moved so slowly, taking the necklace from the young Messenger, that it felt to Murray like ages had passed before the cool metal left his grasp.

It felt like the whole of the Floating City was holding its breath.

The guard raised the necklace, up to what Murray guessed to be eye-level, though he could not see the guard's eyes, if they had any. Without speaking, the guard moved.

Messenger Edward's voice finally broke the boy's concentration. "Murray, get back!"

Murray didn't respond. He stared at the guard, who crossed to the other side of the vault, and held the necklace over the edge of the walkway. Murray held his breath. If his plan was wrong, flawed, somehow, he had just destroyed the world. The guard held the necklace by its chain, so it didn't fall. Not yet. It just dangled in the air, swinging slightly. "You're clever, Messenger Murray Patterson," said the guard. Murray just stood there, unmoving.

“You’re the first in five thousand years to ever crack our riddle.” The guard chuckled a little. “I always knew it would be a child.” Then the guard tossed the necklace over the edge of the walkway.

Messenger Edward made what might have been a squawk of protest, or maybe fear, or maybe both. Clara stayed silent.

Then the world jerked.

For a split second, Murray regretted his choice. Maybe the city *was* going to collapse. Because of him. But, as he focused on the movement, Murray realized they weren't moving *down*. They were steadily moving *up*.

“What were you *thinking*?” Clara asked, rushing to Murray’s side. She wrapped the young Messenger up in a protective hug.

“It doesn’t matter what he was thinking,” Messenger Edward said sternly, coming up behind them. “What matters is what we do next.”

Clara glanced up at the man. “Which is. . .?”

The older Messenger sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Go back home, and live our lives.”

Murray cast his gaze down. “I suppose I’m no longer a Messenger, now that all this is over?”

Messenger Edward thought a moment, and said, “Well, I don’t see why you couldn’t be.”

Clara looked down at the Danger Lands, now a safe distance away. “What about the thief?” she asked.

“Not much to be done on that matter, right now,” Messenger Edward said, following her gaze. “I know I said it didn’t matter, but, what *were* you thinking?” he added.

Murray shrugged. “Well, when the guards said that one of them would toss the locket over the edge, and one would put it into the most secure place in the world, I realized they were *both* the most secure place. Nobody’s allowed down in the Danger Lands by law, and between that and the extreme heat, it makes retrieving the necklace virtually impossible.”

Messenger Edward looked at the younger Messenger, amazed. “And you figured all that out in the moment?”

Murray shrugged again. “Well, not technically. I just had to think back to that first day in the tower, when you told me that the Danger Lands were. . . what was it you said? ‘*One of the safest places.*’ I just had to connect the two.”

Clara glanced at the two guards, now silently watching the conversation. “So, you’re saying that the Danger Lands *are* the vault?” Murray nodded, and there was silence before Clara said, “But, somebody breached the system. Somebody stole the necklace before.”

Messenger Edward winced, “Yes. We suspect that’s because you *can* survive in the Danger Lands for a little while. But hardly long enough to do much.” There was a long silence before anybody spoke.

After a while, the three started up the path back to the city above.

Back home.