

Camp Enigma: Book 01

The Fantastical Transmogrifier

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CHAPTER ONE

As Mom slowed the van, Grayson pressed his elbows into his seat-back to get a better view out the front window. If he somehow managed to pass the entrance exam, he would get to spend his whole entire summer at this brand new camp. He could hardly wait to see what it was going to be like.

"Is this it?" Richie bounced in his seat. "Are we here?"

"This is it." Mom said as she pulled the van off the highway onto a narrow lane through the forest. "Camp Enigma."

"Cool!" Richie shouted. "Grayson! It's like one of your fantasy forests!"

"It kind of is," Grayson said. Ahead, tree branches met over the lane. With the sun shining through the leaves, the forest seemed to glow faintly green.

Grayson really wanted to like this new camp. He hoped to make some friends and maybe have fun.

A taxi cab bumped along in front of them on the little lane. Grayson frowned. Who took a taxi cab to camp?

Beyond the cab, all Grayson could see was thick, green forest. No sight of the camp yet. He sighed as he sat back in his seat to stare out his window. He'd have to wait just a little bit longer.

Something moved in the forest out Richie's window. A deer? No, it was too big to be a deer. "Richie." Grayson tapped his brother's leg, then pointed. "Look."

"Whoa!" Richie pressed his face and hands to his window. "Is that a horse?"

As the van rolled along, Grayson's angle of view changed. "No, it's a....". Grayson leaned way forward to make sure he was seeing what his brain was telling him he was seeing. In the place of its neck and head, the horse in the forest had the torso, arms, and head of a man. A centaur? Grayson leaned back, trying to get a better view around Richie. He was looking at an actual centaur.

"Now, I know we didn't pick this camp," Mom said, "but I think it will be good for you."

"Mom, Mom!" Richie poked his window. "A real fantasy creature! Look!"

It couldn't be real. Grayson closed and rubbed his eyes, then looked back out into the forest.

The centaur was still there. In fact, it was staring right back at their van. Mom laughed. "You boys. You have such wonderful imaginations."

"No, it's real!" shouted Richie. "Look!"

"It must be a statue." As he said it, Grayson realized just how much that made sense. This was a movie making camp after all. There were likely statues all over the place.

"Why would they hide such a good statue way out in the forest?" asked Richie.

Grayson had to admit that Richie had a point.

The centaur turned and galloped off into the woods.

Grayson stared after it. So... not a statue after all.

"That was so cool!" Richie clapped his fists to his chest. "This is the best camp ever!"

Grayson turned his attention out his own window. It must have been a horse. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him. He was so excited and nervous about this camp that, like his mother said, his imagination was running wild. Of course it was. He was actually hoping to get over his shyness this summer.

Something shimmered in the trees. Grayson stared. Maybe twenty paces away, a waterfall glistened in the sun. Except the ground here was flat. There were hills all around, but right there... There couldn't be a waterfall. What the heck?

"Grayson?" Mom asked. "Grayson?"

"Hunh?"

"Grayson? Are you all right?" Mom somehow managed to sound both annoyed and relieved at once. "I called your name at least four times."

"Oh, sorry." Grayson said not taking his gaze from the forest beyond the window. "It's just that..." He couldn't explain the waterfall any better than he could explain the centaur. "I guess I'm just tired from the drive."

"I know Gray-Gray, but we're here so you need to wake up," Mom said. "Do you have your shoes on?"

Grayson winced. He'd asked his mother a million times not to call him Gray-Gray anymore. It was his baby name. He eyed his mother in the rear-view mirror. She was focused on the driving. She probably just called him that because she would miss him over the summer. He decided not to say anything.

"He hates when you call him that," Richie told Mom. "He'll be thirteen at the end of the summer, you know."

Grayson winced some more. Poor Mom.

Mom smiled at Richie in the rear-view. "Yes, Richie, I'm well away of how old Grayson is. I was there when he was born, you know."

The lane came out of the forest onto a gravel parking lot that crunched under their tires.

The parking lot was packed. Packed! There were kids everywhere, some standing around chatting, some hauling camp luggage off to somewhere, some running this way and that, chasing each other, or just plain running.

Mom found an empty spot at the very back of the parking lot. Grayson pulled his shoes on as she pulled the van in right next to the cab.

Grayson still couldn't get over the fact that someone had taken a cab to camp. Must be some rich kid whose parents were too busy and important to drive him.

"Yeah!" Richie punched Grayson playfully on the arm. "We get to do the entrance exam now!"

Grayson's stomach turned over. He hated tests of any kind. No matter how much he studied, he never did well. And he hadn't even known what to study for this one!

"Are we here, Mom? Can I get out?" He straightened his favorite ball cap, the red one that said, *It's not my fault*. "Can I, Mom? Can I get out?"

"Yes, yes," Mom said. "Go ahead, son."

"This is going to be so amazing!" Richie grinned at Grayson. "Come on! Let's to check it out!" Richie threw open his door, bounced out, and was gone.

Grayson wished he was excited about Camp Enigma, the way Richie was. Why was he so worried?

CHAPTER TWO

Grayson peered out his window at the cab, three or four paces away. A redheaded boy about Grayson's age sat in the backseat. He looked as nervous as Grayson felt.

Well, he had to get out of the van sometime. He couldn't really put it off forever. Grayson opened his door and slid out. As he stretched, he surveyed the parking lot. Well, the part of the parking lot that he could see, anyway. There were kids everywhere.

"This way!" shouted a counselor in really-super-bright green shirt. She walked backwards, talking to a group of five kids that followed after her. The kids looked about Richie's age, and they were already filthy.

Across the way, a boy unloaded his belongings from another van.

Three kids ran past the other way. One of them shouted, "I love camp!" Another shouted. "I'm a dragon!" A fourth and smaller kid ran after the group yelling, "Wait for me!"

Grayson just wanted to get back into the van and go back home. He knew it wasn't an option, though. Mom had to work. At least he'd get to learn about how to make videos.

The cab door opened and the redheaded boy got out and looked around. He didn't look rich or fancy or anything. He was a bit overweight and wore old, over-sized clothing. He held a beat-up gray backpack by one of its straps in one hand and a very worn-looking spiral-bound book in the other.

The redheaded boy caught Grayson looking.

It was too late to look away. Grayson forced himself to smile at the redhead. Hopefully the boy would be nice, and not think Grayson was some kind of weirdo or jerk.

The redhead shrugged. "Hey."

"Hey." Grayson wasn't really sure what else to say. He hated being so shy. He'd never really made friends at his last camp, even though he'd gone for six summers in a row. He'd decided he was going to do things differently at this camp.

"I'm Kenny," said the redhead.

"Grayson," Grayson said, not sure what to say next. He'd seen adults shake hands when they introduced himself, but that seemed weird for kids. Asking the boy if he'd seen the waterfall also seemed weird for an introduction.

The cab driver slammed the trunk, making both Grayson and the boy jump.

The cabbie flipped his keys around on his fingers as he came around to Kenny. "Your bags are over there." He pointed towards the front of the cab, to the pile of bags on the grass between the parking lot and the forest.

"Thanks." Kenny reached into his pocket and took out a large stack of money. He handed it over to the cabbie.

Grayson couldn't help but stare. He'd never seen so much money all at once before. Sure on TV and in movies. Not in real life.

The cabbie flipped through the bills, nodded, pocketed them, then got back into the cab. When the cabbie started the cab, Kenny took several steps back. He ended up standing right next to Grayson.

Grayson tried to pretend he hadn't been staring. He didn't want the redhead to think Grayson was rude. It didn't seem to matter, though. The redhead was focused on watching the cab back out, then drive off.

Grayson had to talk to Kenny if he wanted to make friends with him. He had no idea what to say, though. Maybe he could ask Kenny why he'd come to camp in a cab, why his parents hadn't driven him. Or he could ask, if Kenny had so much money, why did he dress in such worn-out clothing? Those questions seemed like ones his mother would tell him were impolite, though, so he tried to think of something else.

Kenny's cab had been right in front of their van. Maybe Kenny had seen the waterfall and the centaur in the forest too. Grayson really did want to know, but if he asked and Kenny hadn't seen either, then Kenny would very likely think Grayson was crazy. That would be it for them being friends.

Kenny turned to Grayson. "Have you been to camp before?"

Grayson let out his breath, relieved that Kenny had come up with something they could discuss. He nodded. He'd been to camp every summer since he was six. He had to say so, now. Out loud. To Kenny. That's what it meant to not be shy anymore. "Six years," Grayson said. Heat rose in his cheeks as he realized it sounded like he was showing off. "I'm just glad I don't have to go to my old camp this summer."

"Why?" asked Kenny.

"Oh, uh..." Grayson swallowed. He hated talking to people. But he wanted to talk to Kenny. And now that they were talking, Grayson actually had to talk. "It was Camp Waternottle," he said. "It was, uh, the worst camp ever." As he wiped his sweaty palms on his shorts, he realized he was talking only about himself. That wasn't the way to make friends. "What about you? Have you been to camp before?"

"Nope." The boy set his backpack on the ground by his feet. "This is my first time." He looked around. "Do you know what we're supposed to do next?"

Grayson didn't. He should know by now, but -

"Hi!" Someone landed beside Grayson, making him jump.

A blond camp counselor stood grinning at them. She had to be a camp counselor. Not only was she way too cheerful, but she was also wearing a bright-green-that-hurt-his-eyes Camp Enigma t-shirt.

"What are your names, campers?" she asked.

Startled, Grayson backed up a step.

"This is Grayson," Mom said, catching him by the shoulders as though she wanted to stop him from backing up any farther. Like she thought he might try to run away. "Grayson Kincaid."

Grayson shrugged free of his mother's hands. He wanted to answer for himself. He would have answered this one himself if he hadn't been so distracted by this counselor's... sunny-ness. Yes, that was it. She was sunny. Her blond hair was sunny, her bright, smiling face was sunny... Her name was probably Sunny.

"Grayson!" Sunny jumped up and clapped her hands. "I'm so glad you're here!" She clapped again. "You're going to have a great summer." She turned to Kenny. "What's your name?"

"Kenny." Kenny shrugged, shooting a quick glance at Grayson. "Kenny Reynolds?" He said it like a question, like he was unsure how to introduce himself and was just copying Grayson's Mom.

Sunny jumped and clapped some more. "That's super! It's so awesome that you two are both here! And you know what?" She pulled a cell phone from her shorts pocket. "I'm pretty sure you two are on the same team." She poked the cell phone, frowning. "Why isn't this thing working?"

"Team?" Grayson glanced at Kenny, wondering if the word team made him as tense as it made Grayson.

"Sure," said Sunny. She looked up at him with a smile. "Your team. The kids you'll take the entrance exam with. The kids who'll be your bunkmates if you pass." She poked her phone again a couple more times. "Yeah, it's really not working." She stuffed it back into her pocket. "No matter. I'm pretty sure you're team number thirty-nine."

Grayson's chest tightened. He was terrible at team sports. Great. Not only would he have to pass a test, he also had to introduce himself to a whole new team of kids. Could this get any worse?

"Wait," said Mom. "Where's Richie?" She looked this way and that, then ran around to the front of the van, still searching in every which direction. Richie obviously wasn't there, so she ran to the back of the van. "Richie!" She always got so frazzled when Richie went missing.

Grayson shook his head. That was Richie. They'd only been at camp for five minutes, and already the kid was lost.

They were parked at the back of the parking lot, right up against the forest. Richie had probably gone in there to go on some adventure or something. Maybe the kid was off searching for the centaur they'd seen. Of course he was. Richie loved the adventures Grayson invented and this would be just another one of those.

"I'll go find him." Grayson was about to start into the woods when Richie's voice came from the forest off to the left.

"Grayson, Grayson!" Richie raced out from behind some bushes about fifty paces away. "Look what I found!" He held something up. "Look!" He ran through the trees towards them.

Grayson blinked, hardly believing his eyes. He couldn't really tell what it was that Richie held in his fist. Whatever it was glowed bright blue. What was kind of camp was this?

CHAPTER THREE

"Grayson! Grayson! Look what I found!" Richie tripped over the low rocks that outlined the edge of the parking lot. He landed flat on his belly in the gravel with an, "Ooof!"

Mom gasped. Her hands flew to her mouth.

The glowing blue stone flew from his hand, hit Grayson's in the thigh and bounced off, bounced along the ground several more times, and finally rolled to a stop against Kenny's foot. It was actually a really cool stone. It was donut shaped, though smaller than any donut Grayson had ever eaten. Some kind of cord looped through its donut hole so that a person could wear the thing like a necklace. Though smaller than most donuts, it would still make for an awfully big pendant. And of course, the stone glowed bright blue.

Mom ran the two paces to flattened Richie and knelt beside him. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

Grayson eyed his younger brother to see if the kid would start crying.

When Richie lifted his head, though, his attention was on his glowing blue stone. He scrambled to it and grabbed it up again. "Look!" He held it out to Mom. "See?"

"It's very nice, son," Mom said, getting to her feet and brushing dirt from her pants with the back of her hand. She spoke as though she were talking about any of other millions of stones Richie had found. Not like Richie was holding a stone that looked like it was radioactive.

Richie held out the glowing gem to Grayson. "Cool, right?"

"Yeah, it's super cool," Grayson said, wondering how to tell Richie to put it down, that it was going to cause him to melt or blow up or something.

"Oh, wow," said Sunny, "It's beautiful. Did you find that in the forest?"

"Yep," said Richie. "Finders keepers." He hugged the stone to his chest.

Sunny frowned. "I'm not so sure about that. Someone must have lost it. It looks like it's very valuable. We should see if we can find who it belongs to."

It did look very valuable, though Grayson was surprised that was the first thing Sunny had commented on. Not the fact that it was blazing blue, dangerous, and probably turning Richie into a mass of nuclear goo right now.

Richie continued to hold the pendant to his chest.

Mom frowned and opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Sunny cocked her head, lifted her eyebrows, and stuck out her hand.

Richie sighed. His shoulders slumped. He lifted his eyebrows at Sunny. "Can I hold onto it just a little bit longer?"

Sunny lowered her hand. "I suppose." "But you have to give it to me right away next time I ask."

"Deal!" Richie hugged the stone.

Mom closed her mouth and raised her eyebrows at Sunny.

Mom smiled at Sunny. "Well, it seems you have everything in order here."

"Yes, ma'am, we do indeed!" Sunny beamed. "No need for you to worry about a thing, Ms Kincaid."

"If no one claims the stone, can I keep it?" Richie dropped to his knees, his fists clasped together under his chin. "Pleeeeeeease?"

Sunny grinned and tussled Richie's hair. "I'll ask."

Just then, a beat-up old car pulled into the spot where Kenny's cab had been parked.

Mom put an arm around Richie and guided him out of the way.

A tall, blond, well-dressed boy in dark sunglasses got out of the car. He was Grayson's age, or maybe a bit older. Grayson had heard the term *sharp dresser* before, but hadn't really known what it meant. He thought it applied to this boy. In fact, Grayson thought that this boy matched the rich kid idea that Grayson thought should have got out of the cab, and Kenny, in his baggy old clothes, better matched this new boy's old car.

"Hi," the boy said. "Zachary MacDonald." He held out his hand to Sunny.

"Hello again, Zachary MacDonald," Sunny said. "Welcome back to camp."

Grayson wondered when Zachary MacDonald could have been at Camp Enigma before. He was sure it had only just opened.

Zachary stuck his hand out at Grayson next. As Grayson shook it, he decided he'd been right earlier when he'd thought it would be weird for kids to shake hands.

"My friends call me Zach."

Grayson smiled, wondering if Zachary MacDonald was telling Grayson to call him Zach. It didn't feel like it.

Zachary shook hands with Kenny next.

Then Richie thrust his glowing blue stone at Zachary. "Look what I found."

Zachary seemed startled and took a step back from Richie. He lifted his sunglasses and looked down his nose at Richie. "Nice." He replaced his sunglasses, not giving the glowing blue stone any more attention than that. "Stay out of trouble, kid." He ruffled Richie's hair, then went around to the back of his car where his father - it had to be his father, they looked exactly alike - was unloading camping stuff.

Grayson watched as another counselor came to help unload Zachary's belongings.

When Zachary smiled at the counselor, another term came to Grayson's mind that Grayson had never really understood before. *Winning smile* now made sense to Grayson. Zachary definitely had a *winning smile*.

"I'll be back to check on camp tomorrow," Zachary's father said. "I need to get going. I have to get to a meeting now."

"I know." Zachary hauled a bag out of the trunk. "You've told me, like, a hundred times."

His father saluted Zachary, then got back into the car.

Zachary gave his father a lazy half-wave, then walked off, leaving the counselor to deal with his belongings.

Grayson wondered where Zachary was going. He wasn't looking around or anything. He was walking like he knew exactly where he was headed.

"That kid's going to be trouble," Kenny whispered to Grayson.

Grayson turned to Kenny. "You think?" Grayson didn't see them being friends, he and Zach. Or, he supposed he'd have to call him Zachary if they weren't friends. Although Grayson hadn't really gotten a bad vibe from him or anything.

"Definitely," Kenny said.

Grayson was about to ask why when Sunny interrupted them. "Here comes the medic. It's time for your medical check-in."

"What's a medical check-in?" Kenny asked.

Grayson turned to see an Asian man coming towards them. He was dressed in the kind of clothes that doctors wore in hospitals, the pale blue outfit that looked kind of like pajamas. He carried a giant tool box with a white cross on a red background on its side. "Hello, there," he said. "I'm the medic here at camp. You can call me Su."

"Are you a doctor?" asked Richie.

"Not quite," said the medic.

"What do you mean not quite?" asked Richie. "Either you are or you aren't."

"I did three years of medical school," said Su. "I didn't quite earn the degree." He smiled. "I'm more than qualified to be the camp medic, though."

"Why'd you drop out of medical school?" asked Richie.

"Richard!" Mom caught Richie by the arm and pulled him back. "That's not your business." She lifted her attention to the medic. "I'm so sorry..." She glanced at his name tag. "Mr. Hyan." She pronounced it HOO-an. Mom always knew how to pronounce people's names. Grayson didn't know how she did it. Mom said she just had a gift. Even for foreign names.

"Please. Call me Su. Or Medic." He set down the first aid kit.

"Do you want to see the pendant I found?" Richie asked. "It's really cool. It's shiny and blue."

"Sure," said Su.

"Great!" Richie produced it from his pocket. It glowed just as brightly as before

Richie grinned. He took it and held it up by its cord to show Su.

The medic cupped his hand behind Richie's stone to pull it a little closer to him. He didn't take it though, he let Richie continue to hold it. Which Grayson thought was nice of him.

"It is very shiny," Su said. "I don't think I've ever seen a stone quite so blue, either."

"I know, right?" Richie beamed.

Kenny leaned over to Grayson and whispered, "Does that rock look *shiny* to you?"

Grayson didn't want to admit that the stone seemed to glow if no one else saw that. Plus he'd seen a centaur and a shimmery waterfall-thing. Grayson was starting to think there was something wrong with his vision. Or maybe his brain. If Kenny was asking, though, there was a chance Grayson wasn't the only one seeing strange things. "Not... quite... shiny, no."

"Not the word I'd use, either," said Kenny. He dropped his voice to a whisper that Grayson could just barely hear. "To me it looks like it's glowing."

The hairs stood up on Grayson's arms. "Really?"

Kenny nodded. "You?"

Grayson let out his breath. So it wasn't just him. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't seeing things that weren't there. He also really liked that Kenny was

talking to him. Maybe they could be friends. Grayson had to keep talking to him if that was going to happen. "Same here," he whispered back. He should say more. "It looks like it's glowing to me too."

"Glowing is different than shiny, right?" Kenny asked.

"I'd say so," Grayson answered.

Kenny cocked his head. "So if they're calling the stone shiny, does that mean they can't see it glowing?"

"Seems that way," said Grayson. He'd never had a conversation this long with anyone other than Richie or Mom. Or maybe one of his teachers. It helped that they were talking about a glowing blue stone, though. It was hard to focus entirely on how hard it was to talk to someone with such a strange object around.

"Why wouldn't they see that it's glowing?" asked Kenny.

Grayson shrugged. "I don't know."

"It doesn't make sense," said Kenny.

Grayson nodded. He wanted to add more to the conversation, but Kenny was right. Nothing about the stone made sense.

"Maybe it came from that waterfall," Kenny said.

"You saw it too?" Grayson said, turning to Kenny. He'd spoken a little more loudly than he'd meant too. He looked around to see if anyone was paying him any attention. Richie was telling the medic all about his nice stone, and Sunny and Mom were talking near the van. Only Mom looked over at him. She smiled, like she was happy he was making friends.

"Yeah." Kenny flipped open his beat-up note book. It was full of sketches. Kenny flipped the pages too fast for Grayson to see much, but he could tell that penciled drawings covered most of every page.

Kenny held out the book for Grayson to see, open to a page near the back of the book. Kenny had sketched a shimmering disk hovering amongst the trees of a forest. He'd only drawn it with pencil, but Kenny had captured it perfectly. Even the fact that it shimmered.

On the opposite page, Kenny had sketched a centaur. It couldn't be a coincidence. Grayson pointed at it. "You saw him too?"

"Yeah, I saw it." Kenny closed the book and tucked it under his arm. "I was hoping you'd seen one or the other. The cabbie didn't see either of them. Even when I pointed them out to him." He frowned. "Of course, the cabbie didn't even look. He just said I had a good imagination."

"That's exactly what my mom said, and she didn't look either," Grayson said. "My brother saw it, though." Grayson realized he was saying this as confirmation that neither he nor Kenny were going crazy, but really, Richie should be the last person to use as a guide to what was normal. "Maybe we're all going crazy."

"Probably," said Kenny. "That's more likely than a centaur and a disappearing waterfall at camp, right?"

"Either that," said Grayson, "Or this is one seriously weird camp."